

Respect media's role to provide opinion

Thursday, 25 February 2010

The Centre for Independent

Journalism (CIJ) is concerned that the Star newspaper is being issued a show-cause letter by the Ministry of Home Affairs, following police reports lodged against the daily over the publication of a column questioning the caning of three Muslim women. CIJ calls on the Home Ministry to retract the show-cause letter and for the police reports to be withdrawn; the media's role to provide opinion on current issues must be respected.

Online news The Malaysian Insider on 24 February reported about the issuing of show cause letter to The Star by the Home Ministry, a day after media reported that the National Indigenous Organisation (Perkasa), Perkasa Selangor, Malaysian Islamic Consumer Association (PPIM) and Malaysian Muslim People's Coalition (IRIMM), as well as eight individuals lodged police reports at separate locations against daily The Star. These NGOs viewed the commentary piece, published on 19 Feb and written by managing editor P. Gunasegaram, as an insult to Islam, coming from a non-Muslim. Besides an apology, the Muslim NGOs in particular demanded that the writer be sacked. In his article, "Persuasion, not compulsion", P. Gunasegaram asked whether the sentence of both caning and detention are proportionate to the offence -- illicit sex -- and argued against punitive sentence for private behaviour. The Star apologised publicly on 24 Feb in response to demands made by some readers.

The lodging of police reports, and the point made that the writer is not fit to comment because he is not a Muslim, does not promote understanding of the issues. A common response is to invoke the use of repressive laws, a threat used not only by the authorities but increasingly, by non-governmental organisations. This worrying trend has the effect of silencing dissenting views and putting a stop to intellectual engagement.

Discussion of laws and court judgments -- be it under civil or syari'ah -- should not be curtailed. It is not a sign of disrespect; in fact, it strengthens Malaysia's legal system. The flow of information, ideas, analyses and opinions should be encouraged; it helps us find out what's what and shapes our understanding of issues and concerns that are faced by a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia's.

We urge the Home Ministry to retract its letter and for the groups and individuals to withdraw their police reports.

Ends

Issued by

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The Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia (CIJ) is a non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free where all people will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek, and impart information.