

Media Statement: Accusations of Foreign Intervention Unfounded

21 December 2016

We, a group of concerned civil society organisations, condemn the attempts by the Malaysian government to discredit human rights work through the vilification of international funding for civil society. We are committed in our pursuit towards creating an enabling environment for democratic participation and good governance.

We are gravely concerned by recent statements made by Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed, and the Malaysian police that about 15 to 20 organisations are being investigated for receiving overseas funding. The funds we receive, whether from local or international funders, are legal under Malaysian laws. There is clear documentation of the funds and multiple levels of oversight to ensure transparency and accountability, including laws in the funders' countries of origin, scrutiny by Bank Negara, and the mandated audits of our organisational accounts.

Open Society Foundations (OSF) has been a popular target of late as a political bogeyman. The attacks wilfully ignore the work done by OSF to support the safety and participation of some of the most at-risk activists around the world, including in Palestine.

There appears to be deliberate and wilful misinformation on the relationship between civil society organisations and funding. We are not government entities or businesses – our policies and programmes are not dictated by investments. Civil society organisations are guided by our constitutions and objectives in our programming, framed by fundamental human rights, and only then approaching potential funders with proposals. Unfortunately, the reality is that the Malaysian government is not known to be a consistent supporter of human rights work in terms of funding, exemplified by the significant cuts to SUHAKAM's budget, thus forcing us to look elsewhere.

The authoritarian nature of our current political system, widespread corruption, and the vast inequalities in our society have led Malaysia to its current troubled state. These are all problems that civil society seeks to address, towards the betterment of our collective future. Many of us have laboured under years of harassment by State and non-State actors alike, and subjected to increasingly draconian laws affecting every area of our work. The arrests and questioning of activists under the Section 124c of the Penal Code and Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, and the raiding of offices since November 2016, are examples of the continued harassment of civil society groups in Malaysia.

We reiterate strongly that our work to promote and protect human rights is both legitimate and necessary in a democratic system. Our government has made commitments to international processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which mandate the involvement of diverse civil society. It is appalling that this principle can be so easily abandoned for political expediency.

Endorsed by:

- All Women's Action Society (AWAM)
- Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ)
- National Human Rights Society (HAKAM)
- Perak Women for Women Society (PWW)
- Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER)
- Persatuan Sahabat Wanita, Selangor (PSWS)
- Tenaganita
- Women's Centre for Change, Penang (WCC)