



malaysia

As peer review nears, NGOs hopeful Putrajaya will meet rights pledges

By Zurairi AR
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Suriani Kempe, Sisters in Islam (SIS) programme manager, and Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) advocacy officer Yu Ren Chung. — Pic by Choo Choy MayKUALA LUMPUR, Oct 24 — Putrajaya will be under the spotlight tonight, when its human rights track record will be scrutinised by the United Nations (UN) in the country's second Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

As one of the parties that submitted a stakeholders' report on Malaysia to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR process (Comango) told The Malay Mail Online yesterday that it remains hopeful that Putrajaya will fulfil its human rights pledges.

Six representatives from Comango, the Malaysian Bar and Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS) have made Geneva, Switzerland their base since Monday to discuss their concerns with representatives of UN members.

According to Comango's spokesman, Honey Tan Lay Ean, the general mood of the group was positive, despite the chilly and gloomy autumn weather there.

“We are having productive meetings with some of the permanent missions here, as well as with representatives from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the UN Special Procedures,” said Tan, who is also from Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (Empower), through email.

“We’re hopeful that Malaysia will accept all recommendations made by member states of the UN that will help it to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of everyone who live in Malaysia.”

Co-ordinated by Empower and human rights watchdog Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram), Comango submitted its report in March this year.

The report was the result of a two-day national consultation in July 2012 attended by 34 NGOs and representatives from Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam), International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the UN.

According to Tan, top of the priority in Comango’s recommendations is for Malaysia to end discrimination in all its forms and promote equality for everyone living in the country.

“Racism — which in Malaysia is intertwined with religion — and sexism are two of the most intransigent forms of discrimination in Malaysia. It is holding Malaysia back from being the best that we can be,” said Tan.

“The government must take steps to put an end the impunity that is enabling some sections of our society to make hate speech and incite violence against those who hold opinions different from theirs.”

Comango has also called for Putrajaya to repeal what it called “excessively repressive laws” passed recently, including the amendments to the Prevention of Crime Act (PCA) that brought back detention without trial.

Two Comango members who stayed back in Malaysia told *The Malay Mail Online* in an interview this week that an important issue addressed in the report is the politicisation of religion.

“The reason why this is such a big issue, is it affects many issues. It affects women’s rights, children’s rights, freedom of religion, minority rights, et cetera,” said Yu Ren Chung, advocacy officer for Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO).

“If anything, we’re challenging the stranglehold the government has on religion,” Yu added, refuting claims from some Muslim NGOs — which have banded under the name MuslimUPRo — that Comango is trying to challenge the position of Islam in the nation.

Meanwhile, Sisters in Islam (SIS) programme manager Suriani Kempe was unperturbed by the sudden attention Comango and the UPR have garnered thanks to MuslimUPRo’s objection, compared to the first UPR in 2009.

“I think they said so themselves, that they didn’t know the first time around. It was a new process for them. By all means, participate ... I think the more people are involved in contemporary issues that go around in the country, the better for them,” said Suriani.

MuslimUPRo stepped up its attacks in the last week ahead of the UPR, with a seminar on the “threat of liberalism” allegedly championed by Comango, organised by Islamist group Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) on Saturday.

The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim) also said in its Friday sermon last week that

complaints of human rights abuses against Malaysia are not genuine, and are part of a masquerade to push the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender (LBGT) agenda to undermine Islam.

Comango's 22-page report touches issues such as the administration of justice; freedom of religion, expression and participation; rights to work, health and education; indigenous and migrants' rights; and discrimination involving sexual orientation and race.

The coalition is made of 54 NGOs, which also included Amnesty International Malaysia, Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Tenaganita, and Seksualiti Merdeka.

Malaysia first came under the UPR review on February 2009, and consequently accepted 62 of the 103 recommendations issued by the UPR working group.

Held every four and a half years, the UPR is a UNHRC mechanism that was established in 2007 to improve the treatment of human rights in all 193 UN member states. Malaysia is currently a member of UNHRC, the second time after a term in 2009.

The process involves a three-hour interactive dialogue, where UNHRC members will question Malaysia based on reports prepared by the government, UN agencies, and the stakeholders' report — which summarises the report of NGOs both national and international.

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