

Malaysia news portal wins right to start newspaper

October 1 2012



Journalists work on their stories at Malaysiakini's office in Kuala Lumpur. A Malaysian court Monday overturned a government ban on plans by an online news portal to publish a newspaper, in what the site's lawyer called a "landmark case".

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Independent portal Malaysiakini has over the past decade become a leading source of information in the Southeast Asian nation, where major newspapers and broadcasters are largely [government](#)-linked.

Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled the government had not acted within its power and its refusal to grant Malaysiakini a printing permit was

"unreasonable", said Edmund Bon, who represented the online portal.

"It's a landmark case; it's historic," Bon told AFP. "It will open the floodgates because the court has recognised that the granting of a permit is a right, not a privilege as the government has said."

Government lawyers could not immediately be reached for comment. They can appeal Monday's ruling.

All newspapers in Malaysia need a permit to print, allowing the government to control them and putting publishers under pressure to toe the line.

Malaysiakini and other online media have remained relatively free—despite occasional raids, bans and government criticism—due to an official pledge not to censor the Internet, made in the mid-90s to attract foreign investment.

Premesh Chandran, co-founder and [chief executive officer](#) of Malaysiakini, said he was "happy" with the court's ruling. Malaysiakini launched the [legal challenge](#) two years ago after authorities rejected its application.

"The court recognised publishing a paper is part of freedom of expression, which is a right under the constitution. This is a fundamental shift of the interpretation of [freedom of speech](#) in the country," he told AFP.

He said Malaysiakini, which has about 2.5 million readers a month, wanted a newspaper to complement its online content and reach a wider audience.

Prime Minister Najib Razak, touting a reform agenda, recently relaxed

the printing permit rules, saying papers no longer had to renew their licenses annually. But the government still has the power to revoke permits.

Elections are due by middle of next year and will be Najib's first test as prime minister at the ballot box.

Critics have slammed his reforms as window-dressing to attract voters after the long-ruling Barisan Nasional coalition suffered its worst results ever in the last polls in 2008.

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Citation: Malaysia news portal wins right to start newspaper (2012, October 1) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-malaysia-news-portal-newspaper.html>

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