

For Immediate Release**Malaysia: Asian human rights groups and activists urge the Prime Minister to halt crackdown on freedom of expression**

(Bangkok, 26 February 2015) – The human rights community in Asia has raised concern over the continued crackdown on freedom of expression in Malaysia, in an open letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Malaysia and signed by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) together with 23 other human rights organisations and activists today. The groups and activists also urged the government to cease all forms of harassment against individuals who hold dissenting opinion from that of the current administration, and to repeal all repressive laws, including the colonial era Sedition Act 1948, echoing previous similar calls made by both the international community and within the country.

The signatories of the open letter, comprising human rights groups and activists from Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor Leste, as well as regional organisations, registered alarm over the government's continued abuse of this legislation, as in the recent conviction of the activist Hishamuddin Rais, who questioned the legitimacy of the 13th General Election results and urged the public to reject the newly-elected government; and the arrest and charges against human rights lawyer Eric Paulsen, after a *Twitter* post criticising the Malaysian Islamic Development Department for spreading extremism through Friday sermons.

The letter, initiated by Bangkok-based regional human rights group, FORUM-ASIA, also deplored the latest arrests and investigations against those who criticised or commented on the Federal Court's decision to uphold the conviction of Anwar Ibrahim of sodomy charges earlier this month. In particular, the groups and activists registered their concern over the arrest of the political cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Haque or Zunar on 10 February 2015, detained for three days after he posted on *Twitter* a post criticising the verdict; and *Parti Sosialis Malaysia* (PSM) Secretary-General S. Arutchelvan, arrested on 19 February 2015 and detained for 24 hours after realising a press statement on behalf of his party on the Federal Court's decision on Anwar.

The open letter also criticised the government's use of the Penal Code to suppress the right to freedom of expression, as demonstrated in the recent cases of activists Adam Adli and Fariz Musa, and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR)'s State Assembly person for Seri Setia, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, arrested under Section 143 Penal Code for unlawful assembly in relation to the organising of a rally on 21 February 2015 to protest against the Federal Court decision on Anwar; and the investigation of Chong Eng, a Penang State Executive Councillor from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), who criticised a statement made by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) that cases of rape, illicit sexual activities and incest can be reduced if women cover their intimate body parts.

"The continued arrests, detention, investigations and charges appear to be a concerted effort to intimidate Malaysians from exercising their right to freedom of expression, a fundamental right enshrined under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia and international human rights law," said Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. *"It is hardly surprising that these efforts to curb free speech appear to be targeted specifically to criticisms against the Barisan Nasional (BN) administration,"* noted Balais-Serrano.

The letter finally warned the Prime Minister over the continued use of repressive legislation and coercive actions by the police. *"Failure to stop the continued crackdown on freedom of expression and repeal repressive legislation will not only damage the worsening international reputation of Malaysia as a democratic country, but also heighten the groundswell of discontent among the Malaysian people*

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domestically,” stressed Balais-Serrano, while urging SUHAKAM to increase its pressure on the government to cease its crackdown, in line with the Commission’s calls for the repeal of the Sedition Act.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a Bangkok-based regional human rights group with 47 member organisations in 16 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta and Geneva. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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