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## Malaysia's Bloggers Fight for Freedom Against Government Push for Regulation

*Fabio Scarpello | Bio | 16 May 2007*  
*World Politics Review Exclusive*

DENPASAR, Indonesia -- [Bloggers United Malaysia 2007](#), Malaysia's first national meeting on blogging, will be aimed at promoting blogging with a series of talks and workshops. However, when Malaysia's tech-savvy meet at Petaling Jaya's Lake View Club May 19, there is little doubt that the most pressing topic at hand will be how to stave off a government push to crack down on online expression.



Blogging has taken Malaysia by storm, rapidly becoming an alternative voice to the state-controlled media. Washington-based Freedom House ranked Malaysia at 150 out of 195 nations surveyed in its [latest global survey of press freedom](#).

Bloggers' success has been the source of their problems, with an increasingly anxious government looking for ways to assert control over the "blogosphere." Malaysia is estimated to have about 10 million Internet users.

Although the Internet is technically under the authority of the Energy, Water and Communications Ministry, leading the government attack is Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin.

Zainuddin studied at the Institute of Journalism in Berlin as a young man, had a distinguished career at the government-linked Utusan Media Group and was president of Malaysia's National Union of Journalists between 1968 and 1970. The 68-year old Zainuddin accuses political blogs of writing lies and using wild language, and seems to symbolize his generation's struggle to grapple with the new medium.

Among those marshalling the bloggers' resistance is Ahirudin Attan, whose blog [Rocky's Bru](#) is among the most visited in the country.

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A journalist, self-defined as "somewhere between veteran and retired," Ahirudin is also the president of The National Alliance of Bloggers of Malaysia, or "All-Blogs," as it is known, the country's first association of bloggers.

As its president explained, All-Blogs aims to protect the rights of bloggers and promote blogging in a responsible manner. It also plans to register with the government, appoint a committee and impose membership fees.

"We also want to make contact with the authorities and engage them in discussions to raise the level of awareness about the positive and negative impacts of blogging," Ahirudin said, underlining the non-confrontational nature of the alliance.

Although it has been brewing for a while, the battle over blogs and bloggers started in earnest on Jan. 4, when Ahirudin and Jeff Ooi, his deputy in the alliance and publisher of the [Screenshots](#) blog, were sued by the government-linked [New Straits Times](#) newspaper, which alleges that the two men made defamatory postings about the paper on their sites.

The case is ongoing and the two rebut the accusations.

On a more general level, the gloves came off in early March, when newspapers and TV picked up corruption allegations about Deputy Internal Security Minister Johari Baharom that were posted on a blog.

The exposure prompted a security ministry circular telling editors of a dozen mainstream newspapers and five television stations that they must not "give any consideration whatsoever" to anti-government material posted online.

Since then, various government officials have accused bloggers of lying and called for regulations to limit their freedom.

Throughout the battle, Malaysia's [Centre for Independent Journalism](#), Paris-based Reporters Without Borders and the [Southeast Asian Press Alliance](#), among other groups, have sided with the bloggers, who lately have also found unexpected allies in the [National Union of Journalists Malaysia](#) (NUJ) and in former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Mohamad is not remembered as a defender of press freedom, but his daughter, Marina, is a blogger at [RantingsbyMM](#).

NUJ has urged the government to recognize bloggers as a new medium of information.

Although Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi earned some brownie points when he rejected a proposal to order local bloggers to register with the government, Zainuddin has kept the pressure on and has now called for bloggers to be classified as either "professionals" or "non-professionals."

He argues that the classification is a "mechanism to prevent misuse of blogs" and that it will "facilitate the action to be taken against those found to have violated the country's laws." Ahirudin defined the proposal as another poorly disguised attempt to register bloggers.

"It is just as ludicrous if I were to call on politicians, like Zainuddin, to be categorized as professional politicians or non-professional politicians," he said.

In a meticulous explanation, lawyer and fellow blogger Nizam Bashir, the man behind the keyboard at the [Poetic Justice](#) blog, shredded Zainuddin's argument and warned that the proposal could lead to the circumvention of key principles of law, such as the presumption of innocence and the right to be heard.

"There are ample mechanisms already in place to regulate Internet content. These include the laws relating to the dissemination of obscene material, defamatory material, copyright material, seditious material and other content," he added.

As the argument rages on, roughly one hundred bloggers are set to make the trip to the western State of Selangor, where BUM will be held.

Among the confirmed speakers are bloggers like Ahirudin Attan, Jeff Ooi and Marina Mahathir, as well as experts such as Sonia Randhawa, executive director of Malaysia's Centre for Independent Journalism.

*Fabio Scarpello is the Southeast Asia bureau chief for the Italian press agency AdnKronos International and a regular contributor to WPR.*

Image: Courtesy of [Susan Loone](#).



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