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Unnecessary Arrest of Lawyer Eric Paulsen over A Twitter Comment

Gerakan Hapus Akta Hasutan (GHAH), in the strongest possible terms, condemns the persecution and harassment against Eric Paulsen, lawyer and co-founder of Lawyers for Liberty and spokesperson of GHAH over his Twitter comment criticising the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM). It is a gross abuse of power to have no fewer than 20 policemen to arrest Eric for merely exercising his constitutional right to freedom of speech.

In a democratic society, every citizen has the right – and duty – to participate in public discourse, and freedom of speech is essential for this purpose. This means that all are entitled to criticise and question the conduct of a public body which is funded by the people via tax and which has failed to respond in an open and accountable manner to the trust placed in them.

It is clear from Eric's tweet that the criticism was intended towards JAKIM as a government agency. A clear line has to be drawn between the religion and the agency that functions to manage Islamic affairs. Eric has earlier explained to the public that he did not mean to insult Islam in his tweet and "criticising Jakim should not be construed as insulting Islam."

GHAH is extremely disappointed and shocked that the Inspector-General of Police would allocate such excessive police resources to stifle freedom of speech and to use the same Twitter social networking site to trumpet Eric's arrest minutes after he was seized. The sudden arrest of Eric can only be interpreted as an orchestrated political ploy to frighten person whom is critical towards the establishment since Eric has already agreed to cooperate and to be questioned by police on 14 January 2015 (Wednesday) when contacted by police official earlier.

The arrest of Eric Paulsen under the Sedition Act marks a serious regression of citizens' freedom of speech, and signals a further break down of our democracy. Criticism against a public agency should not amount to a criminal offence. This is akin to rubbing salt to the already appalling situation in Malaysia with the sedition onslaught against citizens, and the Prime Minister's renouncement on his pledge to repeal the draconian Sedition Act.

GHAH again reaffirms our stand that the Sedition Act is an irrelevant piece of legislation in our modern society. It is delusional to believe that the Sedition Act or any form of intimidation is the answer to maintaining and promoting peace and harmony in the country, given that the Sedition Act is largely used against individuals who have a legitimate criticism and concerns about the country. The government should and must propose a new national harmony legislation that is genuine in achieving national freedom, peace and harmony.

GHAH calls for the immediate release of Eric Paulsen and to halt all investigation against Eric. We again reiterate our call for the government to repeal the Sedition Act, drop all sedition charges, and to have no replacement Act with similar draconian provisions.

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GHAH is a movement supported by 133 civil societies in Malaysia spearheaded by SUARAM, Lawyers for Liberty, IKRAM, among others. The objective of GHAH is to carry out a national campaign to bring to an end to the ever present threat against freedom of expression and opinion by the Sedition Act 1948 that hangs over every Malaysian.