

Freedom of Expression is not a Threat

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Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) is outraged by the fine imposed by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) against BFM radio station, over an interview with Reza Aslan in 2013. Reza Aslan was giving an opinion in his capacity as a scholar of Islam on the Court of Appeal's decision to bar the Herald from using the word "Allah".

The RM10,000 fine is symptomatic of the shrinking democratic space in Malaysia, and the ever-larger threats against freedom of expression and information in the country. Earlier this year, Associate Professor Azmi Sharom was charged under the Sedition Act for also giving his opinion as a scholar, on the 2009 Perak constitutional crisis.

We question the MCMC's broad interpretation of license conditions prohibiting content that may upset the sensibilities of any race and religion. Such an interpretation must be in line with the Federal Constitution's provisions on the right to freedom of expression, as well internationally-recognised human rights norms.

Limits to freedom of expression must be predicated on demonstrable harm, such as hate speech. "Sensibilities" must not be used as justification to silence a diversity of opinions. The MCMC should instead nurture an environment where conversations can happen across different groups and individuals with civility and respect.

We are heartened, however, that Malaysians are standing up for the right to freedom of expression and diversity. Less than 24 hours after the "I pledge RM10 for BFM" page was created, it has already garnered 1,906 "likes".

EMPOWER calls on the MCMC to withdraw the fine and review licensing conditions to ensure that media freedoms are upheld.