Media Statement (1 June 2011): NUJ president's resignation a step backward in media freedom

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia is disappointed at the sequence of events that has led to the resignation of Mohamed Ha'ta Wahari as National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Malaysia president on 31 May 2011. Ha'ta reportedly said that he has resigned following the NUJ executive council's decision that he could no longer be president since he was dismissed from Utusan Malaysia.

CIJ reiterates its earlier criticism of Utusan's disciplinary action against Ha'ta for speaking out for press freedom in his capacity as NUJ president. CIJ is of the view that Ha'ta's dismissal on 21 April and now, resignation from the journalist body he had led, is a step backward in media freedom and a serious curtailment of a union leader's right to speak up on issues affecting the profession. This includes the right to speak up if there are issues involving their own media organisation, as Ha'ta had done against the editors of Utusan Malaysia for disregarding journalism ethics and editorial independence while actively stoking ethnic strife in accordance to the political agenda of their owner, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which dominates the ruling coalition.

In the light of the decades of restrictions on media freedom faced by Malaysian journalists, the need for a strong and vocal union head could not be greater. As in the past years, Malaysia was classified "not free" in Freedom House's 2011 global press freedom rankings, coming in at a dismal 143 out of 196 countries. Also not uncommon are reports of journalists being threatened, such as that of two journalists from Chinese daily Nanyang Siang Pau, who were threatened with physical violence by supporters of the proposed Lynas rare earth plant in Kuantan on 31 May.

CIJ views the resignation of Ha'ta, who has been vocal about his views on press freedom, as a disadvantage to the profession. His brief tenure as NUJ president, lasting barely a year, has been a welcome breath of fresh air on the Malaysian media scene.

CIJ hopes that the NUJ will continue to play its vital role of defending journalists and speaking out for press freedom, despite this latest setback and the dangerous precedent it may set for all union leaders, and not only those from the NUJ.

A journalist union needs to be vocal, not just when negotiating contractual agreements between journalists and media organisations, but also in speaking out for the public interest, as the NUJ has done in these past few months.

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The Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia (CIJ) is a non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free, where all peoples will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek and impart information.