

A draconian piece of legislation like the Films Act enacted in 1981 has no place in any first world country, let alone one that hopes to position itself as a hub for the arts. It criminalises filmmakers, entertainment owners and organisations who make “party political films” and documentaries. It affords no distinction between these filmmakers and those who make obscene films.

Under the current act, the wording is broad and virtually anyone sharing any filmed material that might have a political message can be penalised. The penalties are exceptionally severe ranging from \$100 per film to \$100,000 and imprisonment. We question the intent of legislature in imposing such punishments.

In justifying the restrictions, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Information, Communications and Arts said this in May 2005:

“Party political films’ are disallowed because they are an undesirable medium for political debate in Singapore. They can present political issues in a sensational manner, evoking emotional rather than rational reactions, without affording the opportunity for a meaningful rebuttal or explanation to audience and viewers.”

The explanation made no sense then, and continues to make no sense today. Singaporeans are not irrational beings, incapable of discernment – the law is an insult to our people’s intelligence.

The proposed amendments to the Films Act expands the definitions of terms, enlarges the scope of work of film censors, increases the types of offences, and empowers IMDA officers to raid premises (a job which we doubt such officers want to be burdened with).

There is nothing in the proposed amendments to assure the public that these officials are well qualified to review and rate films independently. Furthermore, raids should be carried out by police officers in possession of a proper warrant, not civil servants.

We are also appalled that the government is exempted from the provisions of the law (both in the original Act and in the proposed amendment). In today’s context, we are literally a one-party state. Under the law, the ruling party will thus be free to make party political films without fear of infringing the law. This is totally unacceptable and against public interest.

The proposed amendments to the Films Act appoint the minister as the final arbiter of disputes especially those that allegedly concern “national security”. The minister represents the government and is clearly not an independent person. He has more important functions to perform than to be involved in policing films.

We urge the government to withdraw the proposed bill and repeal the Films Act 1981. By all means, categorise films fit for children and adults but let Singaporeans make up their own minds about party political films.

Sincerely,

Community Action Network and Function 8