

# Reforms Must Be People-Centred, Not Rushed

By Dato' Seri Hishamuddin Yunus, Chairman, Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM)

When Parliament tabled three major pieces of legislation recently, namely the Urban Renewal Bill, the Gig Workers Bill, and the Government Procurement Bill 2025, the bills were described as landmark reforms. Each addresses pressing national needs to modernising Malaysia's urban landscape, protecting a growing segment of the labour force, and ensuring integrity in the use of public funds.

As Chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), I fully recognise the importance of these reforms. They touch the core of everyday life for millions of Malaysians, the homes they live in, the jobs they rely on, and the trust they place in Government institutions.

Yet the concern raised is not about the objectives of the reforms, but about the process by which they were rushed through Parliament. The unusually compressed timelines, coupled with limited consultation, risk undermining both the legitimacy, and the effectiveness of these laws.

## ***Participation as a Right***

Participation is not merely a procedural step in lawmaking, it is a recognised human right. The right to take part in public affairs is guaranteed under Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and further elaborated in international human rights law. It also forms part of Malaysia's commitment to democratic governance.

When residents facing urban redevelopment fear forced evictions, gig workers worry about partial or temporary protections, and when small businesses anticipate losing out in procurement systems that favour larger players, these anxieties are not unfounded. They arise because affected groups were not given adequate opportunity to study, respond to, and shape the legislation.

Reforms that neglect participation fail to meet the basic needs of inclusivity. They risk leaving behind those they were intended to protect.

## ***Transparency and Accountability***

Transparency is the cornerstone of accountability. When bills are tabled and rushed through without sufficient public debate, Parliament's role as the guardian of democratic deliberation is diminished.

Compressed timelines create suspicion, erode trust, and foster the perception that decisions are being made behind closed doors. In practice, the consequences may be serious: urban renewal projects implemented without safeguards, gig worker protections that are symbolic rather than substantive, and procurement rules that disadvantage smaller players.

True reform requires that the process be as open and accountable as the outcomes are ambitious.

### ***The Role of Parliament***

Parliament should not be seen merely as a place to debate bills. Its deeper responsibility is to scrutinise them rigorously, ensuring that laws passed truly serve the people and safeguard their rights. The recent proposal to establish permanent Parliamentary Select Committees (PSCs) in the Dewan Rakyat is a positive step in that direction, but the plan for only ten committees is far too modest for Malaysia's complex governance landscape. If we are serious about strengthening our democracy, this reform must go further.

PSCs are more than technical bodies. They are platforms where lawmakers can hear directly from experts, civil society, and communities most affected by proposed laws, including vulnerable groups whose voices are often excluded from mainstream debates. Without this engagement, legislation risks being rushed through with limited scrutiny, disconnected from the lived realities of the people it governs, and blind to potential human rights implications.

Automatic referral of every bill to a PSC after its First Reading should therefore be the norm, not the exception. Just as importantly, the findings of these committees must be debated and voted on in Parliament, giving democratic weight to recommendations that can prevent laws from undermining rights and freedoms.

Comparative experience shows why this matters. In the United Kingdom, every ministry is shadowed by a permanent select committee, ensuring systematic, expert, and non-partisan scrutiny. Malaysia, by contrast, has underutilised its PSCs despite having the framework in place. Too often, bills are introduced and rushed through with little or no amendment, as the Executive uses its dominance in Parliament to push them through.

Globally, effective PSCs are entrusted not only with legislative review but also with budgetary oversight and armed with real powers. Crucially, they also serve as a safeguard against policies that might endanger rights, whether through misuse of public funds, discriminatory practices, or unchecked executive authority. In countries

like the UK, PSCs are further supported by professional staff and independent experts, enhancing transparency and ensuring rights-sensitive scrutiny. Malaysia should adopt a similar approach, recognising that rights protection requires both institutional independence and substantive expertise.

Strengthening PSCs is not about slowing down reform, it is about making reform smarter, fairer, and more durable. If Parliament embeds robust committees at the heart of lawmaking, Malaysia can move beyond the politics of speed and show that its democracy is capable of urgency with depth, and progress with justice.

### ***What Malaysia Should Do***

If Malaysia is serious about reform that lasts, several important steps need to be taken.

First, minimum consultation periods should be formalised, with timelines adjusted according to the complexity of each bill. Rushed processes do not serve the public interest, and meaningful consultation cannot be reduced to a box-ticking exercise.

Second, high-impact reforms must undergo fast-track scrutiny by PSCs. This ensures that laws with far-reaching consequences receive careful examination before being passed.

Third, draft bills should be published early to allow genuine input from stakeholders, civil society, and the public. Laws made behind closed doors risk being disconnected from the realities they are meant to address.

Fourth, PSCs must have their mandates expanded to cover budgetary review and the oversight of major public institutions. Scrutiny is incomplete without ensuring accountability for public funds and key agencies.

Fifth, committees must be equipped with real powers: the ability to compel attendance, demand documents, and gather evidence. Without such authority, PSCs risk being reduced to symbolic forums rather than engines of accountability.

Finally, committee reports must be debated and voted on in the Dewan Rakyat, giving weight to their recommendations and ensuring they influence policymaking.

These are not obstacles to reform. They are investments in making reform stronger, more effective, and sustainable. A Parliament that embraces these measures will not only pass laws, but also pass better laws, built on participation, accountability, and trust.

### ***The Cost of Excluding Participation***

Laws made without participation often prove fragile. They may face challenges in the courts, resistance from affected groups, or costly amendments down the road. In the end, they consume more time and resources than if they had been developed through inclusive processes from the outset.

By contrast, reforms that are grounded in participation and transparency are more resilient. They command public trust and foster a sense of shared ownership.

### ***Time to reform***

Malaysia's need for reform is clear. Urban renewal, gig worker protections, and transparent procurement are essential to national progress. However, the process by which these reforms are carried out matters as much as the outcomes.

As SUHAKAM has consistently emphasised, reforms must be rights-based, inclusive, and transparent. Parliament, in fulfilling its legislative duty, must ensure citizens are not bystanders but participants in shaping laws that govern their lives.

Reform done with the people builds legitimacy. Reform done without them breeds resistance. Reform done right takes time but reform done wrong takes forever to fix.