

Najib tells African leaders governance key to growth
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Malaysian premier Najib Abdul Razak on Sunday told a gathering of African leaders, including Zimbabwe's controversial president Robert Mugabe, that good governance was vital to economic growth.

At a forum on promoting economic ties between Malaysia and Africa, Najib (right) said the growth of social media was setting higher standards of accountability for governments around the world and leaders had to be ready to embrace change.

He made the call in front of 16 African leaders including the 87-year-old Mugabe (below), who has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980 and is banned from travelling to the European Union over his regime's human rights record.

"Good governance and best practices are essential prerequisites for economic growth and a precursor for transformation," he said at opening of the three-day event in Putrajaya, south of Kuala Lumpur.

Some people are fearful of the uncertainty that change brings; others are threatened by having to do things differently. A true leader must be able to address these concerns and obstacles and to overcome this resistance to change," Najib added.

He said that in a more globalised world, the social, political and economic situations in most countries were unable to remain stable for long.

Najib said social media was raising people's awareness and setting a "higher standard of accountability about actions and inactions on the part of global governments."

Malaysia's invitation to controversial African leaders with dubious rights records such as Mugabe - who attended the meeting surrounded by bodyguards - has caused concern among activists.

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir (below), who is wanted by the International Criminal Court over genocide and war crimes charges, was also invited but pulled out after opposition to his presence from rights groups.

Former president of the Malaysian Bar Council Ragunath Kesavan said the invitations could be seen as condoning their abuses.

"We should not engage with Mugabe. We should not add legitimacy to this international pariah," he said.

"It will be seen as condoning and sympathetic to what Mugabe is doing in his country."

But Malaysia's heavily trade-dependent economy needs to find new markets for the manufactured products, oil and palm oil that it exports.

Deputy foreign minister Kohilan Pillay has said total trade between Malaysia and Africa in 2010 stood at 25 billion ringgit (\$8.2 billion), a 39 percent surge from the previous year.

"There are tremendous opportunities for Malaysia. We need to explore the various opportunities," he added.

Officials say investors will meet potential partners and identify opportunities during the forum while leaders will map ways to promote trade and economic ties.

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