

'Chief justice invited me,' says Najib
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak today defended his decision to meet with the country's top judges, saying he was invited to do so by Chief Justice Zaki Azmi.

Najib said he had taken pains to make sure that his meeting with members of the judiciary today would not raise any negative views or perceptions on the relationship between the judiciary and executive arms of the government.

"I only dared to meet (with the judges) after the chief justice invited me and said there was no problem," he said in his speech during his first official visit to the Palace of Justice.

Najib said this was not the first time such a meeting had been arranged between the prime minister and judges, adding that there have been precedents to such meetings in the past.

Though he made no mention of it, it appeared that Najib was responding to news reports earlier today that this meeting would be the first time a prime minister meets with members of the judiciary.

The news sparked some controversy, with questions raised over the purpose of the meeting.

Najib said he understood the challenges faced by judges, quoting the late US supreme court judge Thurgood Marshall in saying that a judge's only real source of power is the respect of the people.

"My administration is committed to an independent judiciary that is an essential ingredient in any successful nation-building efforts," he said.

Malaysia handles case backlogs well

Najib praised the Judiciary, which he said managed to reduce the backlog of cases by nearly 90 percent over the past two years while under the stewardship of Zaki, who retires on Monday.

He said "smart measures" taken by the Judiciary to manage the backlog of cases had left only current cases registered in 2010 and 2011 in nearly three-quarters of the courts in the country.

Najib also cited a recent report by the World Bank, titled "Malaysia Court Backlog and Delay Reduction Program: A Progress Report", that gives a positive review of the country's efforts to push for a more efficient system.

Excerpts he quoted from the report said the Malaysian Judiciary's management of case backlog had produced results "rarely reached even in programmes lasting two or three times as long".

The report also said the Judiciary's success provided a "counter-example to contemporary pessimism" over its ability to improve its performance, while presenting an "interesting model" for other countries seeking to cut back on their respective backlogs.

Judiciary has saved millions

In an earlier speech at the event, Zaki said the judiciary had to date saved RM29.06 million in expenses through the implementation of reforms since 2009.

He said the reforms carried out since he took over as chief justice have produced a more efficient Judiciary that performed its duties at the same rate of efficiency, with less people.

Zaki said seven senior judges were scheduled to retire between January this year and February next year, but there was no need to appoint new judges to replace them.

From here, he said, the Judiciary could expect a total of RM7.7 million in savings on operational costs, considering that the government would spend an average of RM1.1 million annually on each senior judge.

Zaki said the reforms also saved RM16.96 million with the closure of 36 courts, comprising nine benches of the High Court, four sessions courts and 23 magistrate's courts, where all cases have been cleared.

Another RM4.4 million has been saved with the removal of 241 temporary support staff and the transfer of 60 support staff to other departments.

"With these savings, I urge the government to reward officials in the Judiciary, who have worked these past three years, with faster promotions and more high positions for them," he added.

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