

Najib: I gave media more freedom
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By Kuek Ser Kuang Keng

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said his three-year premiership had brought about more media freedom, which has been acknowledged internationally.

"Since I become prime minister, Malaysia has moved up nine places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, even as the likes of the United States and Great Britain have slid down.

"And we are now officially one of Southeast Asia's most media-friendly nations, ranked well ahead of Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore," said Najib in his address at the launch of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur.

Speaking to a crowd which comprise mostly foreign correspondents in Malaysia, Najib reiterated his commitment to review censorship laws to foster a vibrant, transparent and fair media landscape.

He cited two online portals - Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insider - as examples to prove his commitment towards press freedom.

"It is also why I have relaxed decades-old media licensing requirements, why I have ensured that the online sphere remains completely free of regulations, and why you can log on the likes of Malaysiakini or Malaysian Insider and find regular and strident criticism of the government.

"Yes, there is still some way to go, but it is impossible to deny that change, real change, is happening in Malaysia," said the premier.

Grill the opposition, too

Najib also appealed to foreign media organisation to provide fair coverage to both his administration and the opposition.

"I'm not naïve. I know that editors choose critical stories above positive ones. And no cub reporter dreams of making big time so he can praise the policies of a sitting government...

"But there are always two sides to every story, and things are rarely as simple as they seem," he said.

He then cited US Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum, as well as French opposition leader Francois Hollande to push his message.

"If your editor called tomorrow and reassigned you to Washington DC, would you grill Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum about their policies, or would you just assume that they must be a better alternative than President Obama because he is in power and they are not?

"If you were sent to Paris would you ask Francois Hollande how he would tackle the Eurozone debt crisis or would you just rally to his cause simple because President Sarkozy holds the keys to the Elysee Palace?" he asked.

"So, close to home here in Malaysia, I want you to ask serious questions of both the government and the opposition - and I want to see both sides giving you serious answers, not evading difficult issues or resorting to irrelevant flannel," he concluded.

'Not better or worse, just different'

Earlier in his speech, Najib stressed that Malaysia is different from Western nations in term of culture and values, hence one should not judge Malaysia from a Western standpoint, and vice versa.

"Put simply, Malaysia is not the West. We are not better or worse, we are just different.

"It is all too easy for politicians in less developed countries to stump for votes by attacking Western culture and values, and that's not a path I'm ever going to follow," he added.

Najib was perhaps alluding to former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was well-known for his critical stance against Western powers during his premiership.

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