

Najib: Law reform has been human rights-friendly

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Urging Malaysians to judge him "not by what I say, but what I do", Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak claims he has upheld human rights on a number of fronts through law reforms.

Opening an international law conference in Kuala Lumpur this morning, Najib cited several examples of how his administration has 'walked the talk' in delivering a "a more open and dynamic democracy".

"We have annulled the three Emergency proclamations, leading to a more human-rights friendly legal environment and we repealed the three controversial laws - the Internal Security Act, Banishment Act, and Restricted Residence Act," he said in his speech.

The government, he said, has also announced its intention to repeal the Sedition Act.

Najib further claimed that the government has allowed "constructive criticism" by the people.

"We promised the rakyat a better right to freedom of speech and expression, and amended the Printing Presses and Publications Act (toward this)," he said.

"We have upheld the rights of everyone to freedom of assembly by abolishing Section 27 of the Police Act and introducing the Peaceful Assembly Act."

Najib said while he was fully aware that amongst the human rights community who view the reforms as "a glass as half empty rather than half full", he said walls are more easily crumbled than foundations raised.

"Just as Rome was not built in a day, the building of a just, equitable and democratic Malaysia cannot be achieved overnight. The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

"We have embarked on several steps already but the journey is long and will continue," Najib said of his reforms.

'Providing legal representation'

The PM also pointed out that when the Malaysian Bar, Sabah Law Association and the Advocates of Sarawak met him in 2009, that led to the formation of the National Legal Aid Foundation which helps ensure that people are given the right to get legal representation.

"It was revealed that 78 percent of accused persons in the magistrate's courts were unrepresented in 2008. I could immediately understand where they were coming from

and I agree there was a great cause of concern that so many people were left legally unrepresented.

"The establishment of the foundation is a firm expression over the government's commitment to breathe life into Article 5(3) of the federal constitution that states the rights of an arrested person shall be allowed to consult the legal practitioner of their choice," he said.

The foundation is funded by the government and private sector and allows Malaysians who earn less than RM36,000 a year to get free legal representation in trials.

Since its operation in April and up to July, lawyers have assisted 16,274 people from remand up to hearing.

Najib said he considers the Malaysian Bar as an important partner in the rule of law and the administration of justice.

"When it speaks we listen. We may not always agree with the views emanating from the Bar or even the activities it undertakes but we hear what they say and observe what they do with interest," he said.

He also urged lawyers to be prepared for competition which will come from overseas following amendment to the Legal Profession Act which sees the entry of licensed foreign lawyers to practice here.

"The competition will no longer come from overseas but in our own backyard. In order to survive, Malaysian lawyers need to have greater and keener grasp of issues and information. They must possess rich knowledge, have great legal acumen and strong appreciation of the socio-economy aspect of every issues which comes before them," he said.

Also present were Chief Justice Arifin Zakaria and Malaysian Bar president Lim Chee Wee.