

Najib backs a freer media
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New premier Najib Abdul Razak has called for the country's media, which is mostly government-linked, to be allowed to report "without fear of consequence".

Najib, the successor of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was criticised for failing to implement promised reforms, said he would encourage a new national debate that would promote transparency and accountability.

"I firmly believe that there is a vital place in that dialogue for a vibrant, free and informed media," the premier said in a speech to the Malaysian Press Institute.

"If we are truly to build a democracy that is responsive to the needs of all the people, we need a media - both old and new - that is empowered to responsibly report what they see, without fear of consequence," he added.

However, he did not float any changes to the publishing licensing system which allows the government to shut down newspapers at will and is the main tool in forcing them to toe the line.

Reporters Without Borders ranks Malaysia 132 out of 173 on its worldwide press freedom index, and says the mainstream media are "often compelled to ignore or to play down the many events organised by the opposition".

Acknowledges success of new media

The 55-year-old premier, who has a personal blog and an account on the micro-blogging service Twitter, acknowledged the success of new media which have become a popular alternative to government-friendly mainstream outlets.

The opposition, which scored unprecedented gains in elections a year ago, has successfully seized on Internet news sites and blogs to convey its message to the public.

The prime minister also urged the media to "move beyond those who offer the journalism of conspiracy theory and rumour" and to halt personal attacks against national leaders.

"I've endured my fair share of these from some quarters of the media," Najib said of the opposition's attempt to link him to the sensational 2006 murder of a Mongolian woman, whose body was blown up with military-grade explosives.

"But I also know that the personal slurs and false accusations levelled against national leaders are deeply damaging to our nation's political discourse and international reputation."

In his first act as premier, Najib in his maiden speech revoked a controversial ban on two opposition party organs and announced the release of 13 people held under security laws that allow for detention without trial.

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