

**The Economist says well done Najib but...  
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 17 — The influential international newspaper The Economist has praised Datuk Seri Najib Razak for his move to repeal the Internal Security Act (ISA) and other controversial security laws but points out that he will have to abolish “institutionalised ethnic discrimination” before he can assume the mantle of a radical reformer.

The extreme right-wing of Umno is expected to go along with the sweeping legislative changes as long as it does not touch on ethnic quotas and divisions, the newspaper said in an opinion published in its popular Banyan column yesterday.

The international media has responded with measured praise to Najib’s efforts to assume the reformist mantle. — Picture by Choo Choy May

“It is the system of ethnic quotas and divisions that is really holding the country back — if Mr Najib started to take an axe to all that, then absolutely nobody would question his credentials as a radical reformer,” the newspaper wrote.

The Economist noted that the reforms announced on the eve of Malaysia Day could further transform the image of Najib from grey, indecisive technocrat to progressive democrat, “or so his supporters hope.”

Some analysts say his plans to speed up reforms to retake middle Malaysia could still hurt Barisan Nasional’s (BN) chances in the next general election because some conservatives may feel alienated.

Najib had said on Thursday in a televised address that the ISA and Emergency Ordinance, both of which allow for indefinite detention without trial, would be repealed and replaced by two new laws for use mainly against suspected terrorists.

The international media has responded with measured praise to the prime minister’s efforts to assume the reformist mantle with the Wall Street Journal also pointing out yesterday that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim’s sodomy trial continues to cast a pall over Najib’s bid to become a reformer.

Newspapers like the Wall Street Journal and The Economist had flayed the Najib administration over its handling of Bersih’s July 9 rally where tens of thousands were dispersed by water cannons and tear gas in chaotic scenes that resulted in nearly 1,700 arrested, scores injured and one ex-soldier dead.

An article in The Economist attacking the heavy-handed police action against Bersih activists was even censored by government officials here.

But Najib’s speech on Thursday has now gained slightly more positive coverage in The Economist, with yesterday’s Banyan column describing the repeal of the ISA a most welcome measure.

“If all these laws are indeed repealed and changes implemented, then the political landscape in Malaysia might look very different in a few years’ time, and Mr Najib will be able to claim a lot of credit for that.”

The newspaper added however that the opposition will also feel vindicated, "although they will worry that Mr Najib has swiped many of their most distinctive campaign promises at the next election."

But The Economist pointed out that Najib's biggest challenge would still be ethnic quotas.

"Some on the extreme Malay wing of the party grumble that all this reform stuff is going too far, but they will go along with it as long as it does not touch on the most profound sources of oppression and grievance in the country, the institutionalised ethnic discrimination that privileges Malays over the country's other races, mainly Chinese and Indians."

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