

**PM's tea with judges implies political tampering, say legal eagles**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
**September 07, 2011**  
**By Debra Chong**

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 7 — The annual Conference of Judges that kicks off today will include, for possibly the first time, a meeting with the prime minister that critics say will further erode public confidence in the independence of the judiciary.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the judges were initially scheduled to discuss writing judgments this afternoon but a last minute change meant a trip to Putrajaya to meet Datuk Seri Najib Razak in a delegation led by outgoing Chief Justice Tun Zaki Azmi.

Zaki, who set a record for being the fastest-rising judge when he was appointed to the top post after spending less than three years on the Bench, will be clocking out on Friday.

Judicial sources said the initial conference agenda focused on judgments as the paperwork is crucial to close disputes brought to court and can mean life or death in criminal cases. There was also supposed to be a briefing on arbitration.

"This has never happened during my time," retired judge Datuk Shaik Daud Ismail replied to The Malaysian Insider when asked if there had been any similar meetings between the head of the executive branch of government and the judicial arm of government in past conferences.

Shaik Daud was first appointed to the High Court in 1984 and stepped down from the Court of Appeal in June 2001.

According to a copy of the conference schedule obtained yesterday by The Malaysian Insider, the judges are to attend the opening ceremony at the JW Marriott Hotel here from 8.30am before boarding a bus after lunch to the yellow-domed Palace of Justice (PoJ) in the national administrative capital some 34km away to meet and take pictures with Najib at 5pm.

After the photo session, Najib will be given a tour of an in-house museum and the courtrooms before being escorted to the top judge's chambers by the judiciary's top four — incoming-CJ Tan Sri Arifin Zakaria, newly-appointed Court of Appeal President Tan Sri Md Raus Sharif, Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak Tan Sri Richard Malanjum, and Chief Judge of Malaya Tan Sri Zulkefli Ahmad Makinudin.

The annual judges' meeting ends with a tea party with the PM in the august courthouse's banquet hall.

Lawyer Rangunath Kesavan, who is the immediate past president of the Malaysian Bar, denounced the judiciary's likely unprecedented meeting with the prime minister during an official conference to discuss its duties, as a "blurring of lines between the separate branches of government".

He said the fact that the meeting will be photographed made it worse.

"The meeting between the prime minister and the judiciary at the judges' conference

implies there is no separation of powers," he told The Malaysian Insider when contacted last night.

"The photo session makes it worse because it is important that the public perceives the judges to be independent," Ragnath added, explaining that capturing the PM together with judges during a meet meant to discuss the judiciary's duties and responsibilities was different from a law conference which talks about disputes.

The judiciary, which has been cast under a cloud since the 1988 controversial sacking of its top judge, former Lord President Tun Salleh Abas, has been under even heavier fire after Election 2008 when Zaki, a former Umno lawyer, was picked to be Chief Justice.

Zaki has introduced several measures to speed up cases and ensure judgments are issued on time but his retirement has been touched by controversy over amendments that allow him to get a full pension despite serving just a few years in the judiciary.

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2011 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/pms-tea-with-judges-impoly-political-tampering-say-legal-eagles/>