

Talk to us, Najib urges foreign journalists
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By R. SITTAMPARAM

REAL ACTION: The govt has taken measures to foster a vibrant, transparent media

KUALA LUMPUR: PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak urged foreign correspondents in Malaysia not to assume that the opposition angle was the only one to take but to talk to the government as well.

"I will be working with my colleagues in the government to improve the way we work with the media and I would ask each of you to return the favour. We're here, so please talk to us," he said at the launching of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Malaysia here last night.

On censorship rules, he said there could be more here than what foreign reporters were used to in their home countries.

"With hindsight, sometimes these rules have been used in heavy-handed ways. But I want to look to the future," he said, explaining that was why he launched a wholesale review of Malaysia's censorship laws last year to foster a media that was vibrant, transparent, fair and transcended the politics of vested interests.

"It's also why I've relaxed decades-old media licensing requirements and ensured that the online sphere remains free of regulation."

Najib noted that this liberalisation of the media was about real action, not just election-year rhetoric, saying that since he became prime minister, Malaysia had moved up nine places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

Najib said Malaysia was now officially one of Southeast Asia's most media-friendly nations, ranking well ahead of Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore.

"Yes, there's still some way to go, but it's impossible to deny that change is happening in Malaysia."

Nevertheless, Najib said, he was not naive as he knew that editors would choose critical stories above positive ones.

"There're always two sides to every story and things are rarely as simple as they seem."

Najib said he was determined to see the government become more responsive to their needs.

Later, at a question-and-answer session, Najib said he was working hard to secure a two-thirds majority for Barisan Nasional in the coming general election although it was becoming more and more difficult to do this in Malaysia and even Singapore.

"In today's modern democracy, many prime ministers would be over the moon if they got a simple majority. A simple majority could still give a comfortable government; it is better than a hung government."

Present at the event were senior local media editors and foreign journalists posted in Malaysia.

On his upcoming visit to Myanmar, Najib said he believed it was timely as the country was serious about its reforms.

"I want to see the new plans the president has for the country and to forge closer links as we've always had good relations with Myanmar."

On the guessing game on the date of the 13th general election, Najib coyly said although he knew about it, he hoped the public, including the media, would understand that he needed to keep a few secrets to himself.

Najib said the question on the election date was akin to asking the Coca Cola chief executive officer to divulge the secret ingredients that made the drink world famous.

"I'm sure you can appreciate why I can't reveal it... even if I know, I got to keep the trade secret to myself."

Najib said he was aware that some foreign news agencies had predicted that the election would be held in June.

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