

Relinquishing ISA was no easy task, says Najib
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 12 — It was not easy for the home minister and other security officials to give up their powers under the Internal Security Act (ISA), Datuk Seri Najib Razak said today.

But the prime minister said mounting public demands meant the law, called draconian by critics, had to be repealed.

Najib said that letting go of the power to detain individuals without trial was especially tough for Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein.

"It wasn't easy for the home minister to give up the powers to detain individuals but he did so willingly because he understands the people's expectations," he said when officiating the opening of Menara 1 at Bukit Aman police headquarters here.

Najib stressed that both his government and the police force must strike a "fine balance" between upholding citizens' civil liberties and safeguarding national security even as society now demanded greater freedoms.

He pointed out that in a parliamentary democracy, the government as well as its institutions existed for the benefit of the people and, as such, the hopes and expectations of the public must be taken into consideration.

"The people hope that their fundamental human rights are guaranteed. At the same time, we must balance the rights of the individual with that of society at large."

"This is a fine balance and we have to a platform through with this can be achieved," he said.

These new demands, which came about due to better education and exposure to the global trends, was "not unreasonable", Najib said, adding that he was confident the police would be able to meet this higher bar.

The law replacing the ISA was tabled in the Dewan Rakyat on Tuesday, dropping the option to indefinitely detain an individual without trial and introducing a maximum detention period of 28 days for investigation purposes.

Under the ISA, an individual believed to have committed a security offence may be detained without trial for up to two years on orders from the home minister.

The Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill, tabled for first reading by de facto law minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, states that "all security offences shall be tried by the High Court".

The new law also notably states that no individual may be arrested solely for his political

belief or any political activity as promised by Najib in September, when he announced a raft of reforms aimed at strengthening civil liberties.

But the proposed law still allows any police officer to arrest and detain "any person whom he has reason to believe to be involved in security offences" without warrant for 24 hours for investigation.

The Malaysian Bar has criticised the Bill for its wide definition of security offences and its "radical departure" from ordinary rules of evidence, which may negatively impact on the accused's right to a fair trial.

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