

**Najib: ASEAN's 'gentle' approach main catalyst for Myanmar reforms**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
**April 4, 2012**  
**By Yow Hong Chieh**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 4 — ASEAN's "gentle encouragement" did more than Western sanctions to pave the way for Myanmar's recent dramatic shift towards openness and democracy, Datuk Seri Najib Razak has said.

The prime minister said in a Wall Street Journal opinion piece published today that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' constructive engagement had been as effective, if not more so, than "scoldings" by the West in driving political change in Myanmar.

It was this same "nuanced view" that led the 10-state regional grouping to admit Myanmar as a member in 1997, despite the long-standing Western view that the surest way to bring change to less-free countries was to "economically cripple" them through isolation, he said.

"Those of us in ASEAN have long thought of it less as an association and more as a family. Asians traditionally place a great deal of importance on the family, celebrating each other's successes and supporting each other when times are hard," Najib said.

"Unlike some cultures, where difficult members can be marginalised, ignored or left to be dealt with by others, Asians are proud to take care of their own.

"Writ large at the level of international diplomacy, this approach ensures that countries do not lose face and leaves open the door to leaders who are committed to reform."

Najib said Myanmar's reforms were the clearest example of how ASEAN has been instrumental in driving economic growth and political development in its member nations, despite criticism that it does too little to promote democracy and human rights.

He noted that efforts to promote political reform among ASEAN states were helped by the grouping's ability to foster trade among its members, which hit US\$500 billion (RM1.5 trillion) in 2010.

This sustained economic growth has lifted tens of millions out of poverty and created new middle classes across the region, fuelling calls for more political representation and greater freedoms, he said.

"Moreover, as the open economies of reform-minded ASEAN nations like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia race ahead, the leadership in countries such as Myanmar recognise they are being left behind," the prime minister said.

"They also understand that political reform can create a huge economic windfall. So by encouraging trade, growth and development, ASEAN helps establish the conditions necessary for fundamental freedoms to flourish."

Najib said steady reform was the best way to secure lasting stability, pointing out that the

process of betterment was continuing in Malaysia — Southeast Asia's oldest democracy — even now.

He stressed that since he took over as prime minister three years ago, he has "never wavered" in his commitment to deliver real, wide-ranging economic and political change to benefit all Malaysians regardless of race or religion.

"It is a process of evolution rather than revolution, and that process can best be supported and encouraged by a tight-knit family of nations working together to help each other..." he said.

"Our future lies in closer, warmer relations, speaking with one voice and with one goal in mind: The continued development of our economies, our societies and above all our democracies. It is, in short, a very Asian, very ASEAN approach."

The Malaysian Insider

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