

Najib: Press freedom and violence against media two separate issues
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 6 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak has insisted that his administration respects press freedom, saying last Saturday's alleged police violence against the media is a separate issue entirely.

Media groups had recently claimed that press freedom in Malaysia was under threat, particularly following last weekend's Bersih 3.0 rally where police allegedly assaulted reporters and destroyed their camera equipment.

"The police attacks on reporters and... press freedom are two separate and different issues," said Najib according to a Sin Chew Daily report today, distancing his government from any alleged suppression of media freedom.

He pointed to the recent amendments of the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984) to back his claim of the government's support for press freedom.

Last month, the amendments to the act saw the removal of the requirement for an annual renewal of publishing permits and also the Home Minister's absolute discretion in the matter.

"We should always remember: we must govern the country based on the spirit of the law. No one can be above the law or escape legal punishment," Najib was also quoted as saying by the Chinese daily.

He was also reported as saying that both police personnel who had used excessive force and unruly protesters who had attacked the police would be subject to the same treatment under the country's laws.

However, Najib defended the police force, saying that the "blame should not be placed on the entire police force" as "many of them had faithfully carried out their duties in maintaining public order" on the day of the rally.

The government is expected to announce the members of an independent panel set up to probe the Bersih violence by next week.

The prime minister said that the panel will "submit a fair and objective report and recommendations to the government" after investigations.

The peaceful Bersih sit-in protest turned chaotic after police fired teargas and chemical-laced water at the crowd after some protestors breached the barricades at Dataran Merdeka.

After the rally ended, some unruly protesters had defied police orders to disperse and taunted the police.

They were seen attacking the police with glass bottles, mineral water bottles and broken concrete slabs.

On World Press Freedom Day, Chinese dailies printed their front pages in black and white to protest against violence on reporters.

Members of the media also wore black with yellow ribbons as a sign of protest.

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