

Najib: Reforms to take time but will be 'irreversible'
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By Lee Wei Lian

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 26 — The prime minister defended his administration's track record in democratic reforms today, saying that while they will take time to implement, their effects will be permanent.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak said at the opening of the 2012 International Malaysia Law Conference that the government had proven its sincerity by repealing some laws that were considered repressive such as the Internal Security Act 1971, but added that "building a just and equitable Malaysia cannot be achieved overnight."

"We have embarked not on one step but many steps," he said. "The reforms will be irreversible; that, I promise you."

For Najib, opening the law conference was also a sentimental occasion, as his father, former prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, had inaugurated the first instalment of the conference in 1971.

Najib quoted liberally from his father's speech from the first conference, noting that Malaysia's second prime minister had called upon the Bar Council to promote racial harmony in a society that had become "fragmented" and "polarised."

"Despite the occasional bellicosity and belligerence both in politics and in the legal profession, which is a part of the cut and thrust of debate and discussion in the public sphere in a free and democratic society, I would like to strongly reiterate my father's affirmation of the legal profession," said Najib.

He also noted that his father had called for a legal system that was progressive and that the nation needed to have the courage to reject laws that no longer "squares up to the facts of our society."

"This was said in 1971 and every word of it remains just as true today," said Najib.

He also revealed his father had confided that being called to the Malaysian Bar was one of the latter's greatest sources of pride and that the former prime minister had expressed an intention to practise law after retiring as the country's chief executive.

While Najib has pushed for reforms since coming into office in 2009, many observers and critics have said that the pace has been too slow and marred by lack of fundamental changes.

His administration has so far repealed the Internal Security Act 1971, the Banishment Act 1959 and the Restricted Residence Act 1933.

It also eased licensing requirements on the country's media by amending the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 and introduced the Peaceful Assembly Act 2011 to allow for some form of public protests.

It also stated its intention to allow for more constructive criticism by planning to repeal the Sedition Act 1948.

"Notwithstanding the more progressive legislation that has been gradually introduced over the last year, I am fully aware that there are some amongst you who will still choose to see the glass as half empty rather than half full," Najib said.

"To them I have this to say: Walls are more easily crumbled than foundations raised. The painstaking effort of building strong and solid foundations that will stand the test of time, takes time."

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