

**Najib signs ASEAN's first human rights convention**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 18 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak signed ASEAN's first human rights declaration (AHRD) in Cambodia today, officially committing Malaysia to its first foreign convention to promote fair treatment of every individual irrespective of race, religion and political opinion.

Today's signing, which took place during the 21st ASEAN Summit at the Peace Palace in the capital city of Phnom Penh, comes at an opportune time for Malaysia and the Barisan Nasional (BN) government led by Najib, which has come under close international scrutiny for its alleged mishandling of several recent human rights issues.

"ASEAN shall pursue the protection and promotion of human rights in the region in our own way and also try to maintain the highest standard as expressed in various declarations and instruments of the international community," ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan was quoted as saying in *The Star Online*.

According to media reports, the AHRD has a total of 40 clauses and covers areas like civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, developmental processes and peace enhancement.

The declaration also states that the rights of women, children, elderly and disabled persons and migrant workers are integral and indivisible part of human rights and fundamental freedom, *The Star* reported.

Najib has found himself in the international spotlight on numerous occasions, taking the hit for his administration's alleged heavy-handedness in dealing with matters concerning civil freedom, individual rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Some key examples include the widespread crackdown on two pro-democracy rallies held by electoral reform movement Bersih 2.0 — one on July 9, 2011, and another on April 28 this year — which resulted in scene of chaos and violence on the streets of this usually peaceful capital city.

To dull the uproar, however, Najib has taken great pains to improve civil liberties in Malaysia, even agreeing to repeal the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Sedition Act, enacting a new law to regulate public gatherings, agreeing to allow student participation in politics and relaxing provisions in laws governing press freedom.

But after the last protest on April 28, foreign media reports predicted that the government's handling of the event would likely undermine Najib's image as a reformist and force the prime minister to delay the next general election.

Several newswires, picked up by major newspapers globally, also took the same stance, with Reuters reporting that police action raised "the risk of a political backlash that could delay national polls which had been expected as early as June."

Agence France-Presse also said that "the rally poses a dilemma for Najib, who since last year's crackdown has sought to portray himself as a reformer, launching a campaign to repeal authoritarian laws in a bid to create what he called 'the greatest democracy'."

Several reports pointed to the first Bersih rally held just months before the March 2008 elections, which saw BN record its worst electoral performance ever, ceding its customary two-thirds supermajority in Parliament and five state governments.

Najib took over from Tun Abdullah Badawi a year later, ostensibly to improve on the results and some observers say only a return to two-thirds majority will guarantee he remains Umno president.

Widespread condemnation from the international press of Putrajaya's crack down on last July's Bersih rally saw Najib announce a raft of reforms including a parliamentary select committee on electoral reforms and the Peaceful Assembly Act, a major concession to win back an alienated middle-class.

But the findings of a bipartisan panel have been criticised as cosmetic by civil society and the opposition and yesterday's planned sit-in was the first major test of the new law regulating demonstrations the BN chief says abides by "international norms".

The foreign press had at the time also widely carried global civil liberties watchdog Human Rights Watch's criticism of the government, saying it showed "contempt for its people's basic rights and freedoms."

"Despite all the talk of 'reform' over the past year, we're seeing a repeat of repressive actions by a government that does not hesitate to use force when it feels its prerogatives are challenged," said Phil Robertson, its deputy Asia director.

Apart from Bersih, the BN administration has also earned itself international condemnation for bringing charges of sexual misconduct and sodomy against Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim numerous occasions, a move that the leader's supporters have claimed was merely to stifle his campaign to topple the ruling pact.

Several cases of deaths in custody over the past few years had also cast the government in the spotlight for alleged human rights abuses. One example is the death of DAP political aide Teoh Beng Hock, whose death, which occurred while he was under the care of anti-graft officials, has continued to haunt the government since 2009.

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