

**Ahead of polls, Najib awards 1,000 taxi permits, promises more**  
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**By Syed Jaymal Zahiid**

PUTRAJAYA, March 24 — Putrajaya awarded 1,000 individual permits to taxi drivers today and promised more soon with Datuk Seri Najib Razak saying it was proof that the Barisan Nasional (BN) government fulfills its promises.

The announcement comes as part of the administration's move to ward off potential voter backlash from some 80,000 registered taxi drivers nationwide, who have been angered by delayed reforms in the industry.

"What did I promise? I had promised individual permits to taxi drivers. Even though there are many companies that gave jobs to you, some had exploited tantamount to a slavery system of the past.

"Ini satu lagi janji ditepati kerajaan (This is one more of the promises fulfilled by the government)," Najib told some 5,000 taxi drivers at the permit distribution event held at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre here.

The current rent system, where cabbies are required to pay as high as a third of their income to lease taxis from companies often-politically linked, had been described as "modern day slavery".

Recently, a local pressure group representing Klang Valley taxi drivers kicked off a nationwide "We Want Permits" campaign, hoping to pressure Putrajaya into offering unconditional taxi permits to individual applicants.

The group, which calls itself the Malaysian Taxi Drivers Claims Movement (TEKSI), railed against the Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD) for turning a deaf ear to their demands, despite purportedly promising to hold discussions.

With national polls expected to be held within weeks, the Najib administration needs to avoid colliding with key voter groups like taxi drivers as it could affect the ruling government's chances at the ballot boxes in what is expected to be the tightest election race to date.

TEKSI had previously threatened to become Pakatan Rakyat ambassadors if their demands are not met by the government.

Najib made this clear when he said today the decision to award the direct licences reflected the ruling coalition's seriousness in safeguarding the welfare of taxi drivers.

"Let's create this bai'ah (co-operation) among us. We can give more licences apart from this one. You have to bai'ah with the government.

"Do not forget the government's goodwill," he said.

The country's sixth premier also reminded taxi drivers that, prior to today's announcement, Putrajaya had given out through SPAD vouchers worth RM520 as tyre subsidies under the Teksi Rakyat 1 Malaysia (TR1M) initiative to help cabbies cope with maintenance costs.

Najib said Putrajaya will continue a second round of such aid under "TR1M 2.0" as well as a RM500 grant for drivers seeking to purchase cars and to be converted into taxis. The grant is available only for Proton's Exora model.

The move could see BN edge out its political rivals in the race to win the group's support, a point the prime minister raised when he told the attendees that while PR made mere promises, his administration delivers.

PR had previously promised to fix the problems facing taxi drivers should it wrest federal power in Election 2013.

"With PR you only have Bersih 1.0, Bersih 2.0, Bersih 3.0. With BN you have BR1M 1.0, BR1M 2.0, TR1M 1.0 and TR1M 2.0.

"The opposition only knows how to create chaos. We, on the other hand, aim to protect the welfare of the people," he said to thunderous applause.

Two hundred of the 1,000 licences available were given out today.

Several taxi drivers polled by The Malaysian Insider at the event said they were "extremely" happy with Najib's announcement, while some believed this will strengthen support for the ruling coalition in the coming polls.

"I am very happy. We have been waiting for this for a long time now. I'm sure many will vote for BN in the elections," said one taxi driver who only wanted to be known as Norman.

Speaking to reporters after the event, SPAD chairman Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar explained the permits, which are non-transferable, will come with a comprehensive insurance and maintenance package. Payment for the permit can be stretched over seven years.

"Among the conditions to secure the permit at the that the taxi drivers must be aged 60 years and below, and if above that age, they must be certified fit to handle the job by a doctor," he said.

He also revealed that SPAD and the government are still in the process of developing a more efficient model for the taxi industry and is expected to unveil it soon.

"What we are doing now is the turning point to the modernisation of the taxi industry. This (modernisation) will be implemented when the time comes," he said.

There are nearly 80,000 taxis in Malaysia, with most of them plying Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam and Klang areas, but official records showed there were 79,571 registered taxi drivers and 1,303 taxi companies nationwide. These companies owned 31,978 permits or 48 per cent of the total taxi permits in the country.

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