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PERDANA MENTERI MALAYSIA**

Venue : **EQUATORIAL HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR**

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Title : **LAUNCHING OF THE FOREIGN
CORRESPONDENTS CLUB OF MALAYSIA**

1. Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. It is a great honour to be here with all of you tonight, and to have been asked to preside over an event that I know you'll agree has been a long time coming. As reporters you will be aware that Malaysia is at the forefront of ASEAN in many fields – the Global Peace Index says we are the safest country in the region; we have some of the highest foreign investment levels ever seen in this part of the world; we are even home to South East Asia's first upside-down house... but for too long we have lagged behind in not having an official Foreign Correspondents Club.

2. This is, I think, somewhat ironic, as Malaysia became the region's earliest home to journalists when South East Asia's first newspaper was published in Penang more than two centuries ago. Breaking stories in the Prince of Wales Island Gazette included details of the latest opium prices and the arrival of a shipment of "superior ale"... no less pressing issues than those that occupy the minds of foreign correspondents today: predicting economic ups and downs, guessing when the general election will take place, and filing urgent copy on the smoking habits of orang-utans!

3. But we blazed a trail back then and we are set to blaze another one tonight. As Prime Minister I was delighted to approve your application to formally establish a place where journalists from around the world can meet, socialise and exchange ideas – and I have no doubt the Foreign Correspondents Club of Malaysia will go on to become one of the most if not the most dynamic, progressive and forward-thinking in the region.

4. We can all agree that good journalism – fearless, objective, *necessary* journalism – is defined by the free flow of information. This club will build on the long tradition of no-holds-barred writing and exposé that has made foreign correspondents the rock stars of the journalism world... although I'm pretty sure that's the only resemblance between Mick Jagger and Romen Bose!

5. As foreign correspondents, you go to the places no-one else wants to go – Kuala Lumpur notwithstanding! – and you tell the stories some people don't want you to tell. It is never easy, and it is often dangerous – as we have seen with the tragic deaths of Marie Colvin, Rémi Ochlik and Gilles Jacquier in Syria earlier this year, and of Malaysia's own Noramfaizul Mohd Nor in Somalia last September.

6. They were fine, fearless and distinguished men and women, they devoted their lives to the pursuit of truth, and they paid the ultimate price for the stories they told – but it is vital that foreign correspondents from around the world continue to go where others fear to tread, to speak truth to power and to bring insight and illumination to the public.

7. Because a free media, with journalists at liberty to publish sometime uncomfortable truths without fear of censure or reprisal, is the bedrock of any democracy, and one that we lose sight of at our peril. You may be surprised to hear me say this, when the popular narrative in the western media holds that Malaysia is a country where the voices of opposition are routinely silenced... well, I believe you're all educated, intelligent, discerning people so I'll leave you to decide on that.

8. Yes, we do have censorship rules, maybe more than you are used to in your home countries. And yes, with hindsight, sometimes in the past these rules have been used in heavy-handed ways. But I want to look to the future. That is why, last year, I launched a wholesale review of Malaysia's censorship laws in order to foster a media that transcends the politics of vested interests, a media that is vibrant, transparent and, above all, fair.

9. It is also why I have relaxed decades-old media licensing requirements, why I have ensured that the online sphere remains completely free of regulation, and why you can log on to the likes of Malaysiakini or Malaysian Insider and find regular and strident criticism of the government.

10. So this liberalisation of the media is about real action, not just an election-year rhetoric – and you don't just have to take my word for it. Since I became Prime Minister Malaysia has moved up nine places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, even as the likes of the United States and Great Britain have slid down. And we are now officially one of South East Asia's most media-friendly nations, ranked well ahead of Thailand, the Philippines and if I may add Singapore too. Yes, there is still some way to go, but it is no denying that change real change taking place and is happening in Malaysia.

11. Change is happening in the economy. Our Economic Transformation Programme has led to foreign investment reaching record levels, the stock market hitting new highs and, for the first time ever, all Malaysians in the near future will be entitled to a minimum wage in return for their labours.

12. Change is happening in the electoral system. I am proud to say that the next general election will be the first in Malaysia's history to use indelible ink to reduce the possibility of voter fraud, along with a host of other improvements recommended by the Select Committee on electoral reform that we established last year.

13. And change is happening to the very laws that govern our country. Malaysia has long had a strong and independent judiciary – as was demonstrated recently in the outcome of a certain court case you may have heard about – but I am committed to going further still. That is why the Internal Security Act is being repealed and the new act will be presented at this parliamentary session, why the Emergency Ordinances have been lifted after decades of use and occasional misuse, and why the police no longer have the right to stop a peaceful political assembly, regardless of the organiser's views.

14. Yet change and continuity go hand in hand, and if we embrace modern, progressive, outward-facing values we must also cherish and protect long-held traditions. Here in Malaysia we are rightly proud of our unique history and culture – just as Western nations strive to protect their traditions from the effects of demographic change – and we are determined to defend our way of life from the onslaught of global cultural hegemony. That doesn't mean we want to root ourselves in the past, far from it or unable to engage with 21st century art, music and literature. But it does mean we want to preserve our basic values – values that are widely supported by people across the whole of the political spectrum.

15. As Prime Minister, I have a responsibility to protect and uphold those values. And so, from time to time, the government steps in to restrict publications or activities that put our traditions at risk – and I make no apology for that. It is a crude oversimplification indeed to look at Malaysia from a Western standpoint and say that we are "wrong". It is not about deciding whether the Eastern or Western model is "right" – in fact they are both right for the cultures they serve.

16. Put simply, Malaysia is not the West. We are not better or worse, we are just different. It is all too easy for politicians in less developed countries to stump for votes by attacking Western culture and values, and that's not a

path I'm ever going to follow. But I am not afraid to say that what seems normal and obvious to Western eyes is not the same as what seems normal and obvious to Malaysians – and I take issue with the notion, shot through the complacent reporting of some of your less sophisticated, less reflective colleagues, that Western values are the only values. Malaysia is not a country where “anything goes”. For us, some things are not OK.

17. Nor should we in Asia pass judgement on what happens in Europe, Australia and North America. I have always believed that, instead of sniping at each other from opposite sides of the world, we would all do well to try and better understand what we can learn from each other.

18. As foreign correspondents, and as members of this club, you are the eyes through which the world sees Malaysia, the ears through which it hears Malaysian voices. That gives you a great deal of power, but as Stanley Baldwin noted, it is all too easy for the media to exercise that power without responsibility – and, just as I have a responsibility to protect Malaysian traditions, so you have a responsibility to represent our values, our people and our politicians as they really are.

19. But I'm not naïve. I know that editors choose critical stories above positive ones, and that no cub reporter dreams of making the big time so he can praise the policies of a sitting government. Even Shakespeare's Marc Antony recognised that if you want to please the crowd it is easier to bury someone than to praise them... but there are always two sides to every story, and things are rarely as simple as they seem.

20. If your editor called tomorrow and reassigned you to Washington DC, would you grill Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum about their policies, or would you just assume that they must be a better alternative than President Obama because he is in power and they are not? If you were sent to Paris would you ask Francois Hollande how he would tackle the Eurozone debt crisis or would you just rally to his cause simply because President Sarkozy holds the keys to the Elysée Palace?

21. So, closer to home here in Malaysia, I want you to ask serious questions of both the Government and the Opposition – and I want you to see both sides giving you serious answers, not evading difficult issues or resorting to irrelevant flannel.

22. For my part, I am determined to see this Government become more approachable and more responsive to your needs. I have heard complaints that it can be hard to gain access to ministers or officials or to source a government line on breaking news. If we are going to have a free and frank exchange of views, this needs to change. So, while I can't promise you will always get the interview you want or the comment your editor is demanding, I will be working with my colleagues in Government to improve the way we work together with the media – and I would ask each of you to return the favour. We're here, so please talk to us – and please don't just assume the opposition angle is the only one to take.

23. I am committed to making that conversation work and to helping you take the facts – the full facts – to the people of Malaysia and the world. We have come a long way since the dark days of 1965 when journalist Alex Josey was expelled from our country for criticising the federal government – and today, it feels important for me to say that I am very glad you are here!

24. As the most ethnically diverse people in the region, Malaysians have always embraced outsiders and, while we may not see eye to eye on every issue or approve of everything each other says or does, as long as I am Prime Minister you will always be welcome in our country.

25. I wish you all every success with your work, with your careers and above all with this, Malaysia's new Foreign Correspondents Club.

Thank you.

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