

Opening of the Legal Year 2026 Speech

Salutations

May it please Your Honours,

YAA Datuk Seri Utama Wan Ahmad Farid bin Wan Salleh, the Chief Justice of Malaysia,

The Honourable Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Institutional Reform) YB Dato' Sri Azalina binti Othman Said,

YAA Dato' Abu Bakar bin Jais, the President of the Court of Appeal,

YAA Dato' Hashim bin Hamzah, Chief Judge of Malaya,

YAA Datuk Hajah Azizah binti Haji Nawawi, Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak,

Judges of the Superior Courts and Judicial Commissioners,

The Honourable Tan Sri Mohd Dusuki Bin Mokhtar, Attorney General of Malaysia

Honourable State Attorney-General of Sabah,

Honourable State Attorney-General of Sarawak,

President of the Sabah Law Society,

President of the Advocates Association of Sarawak,

Members of the Malaysian Bar,

Leaders and Members of Foreign Bar Associations and Law Societies,

Officers of the judicial and legal service,

Distinguished guests, members of the legal fraternity, ladies and gentlemen.

My Lord, Chief Justice, on behalf of the Malaysian Bar I wish to record our deep respect for the judiciary and your leadership in safeguarding the administration of justice in Malaysia. Judicial independence remains the cornerstone of the rule of law, and the Bar remains committed to supporting a justice system that is impartial, efficient, and accessible. The cordial and professional relationship between Bench and Bar is essential to public confidence, and we appreciate the many initiatives taken by the Courts to modernize processes and strengthen access to justice.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate My Lord, as well as:

1. YAA Dato' Abu Bakar bin Jais, President of the Court of Appeal;
2. YAA Dato' Hashim bin Hamzah, Chief Judge of the High Court in Malaya;
3. YAA Datuk Hajah Azizah binti Haji Nawawi, Chief Judge of the High Court in Sabah and Sarawak; and
4. All judges appointed or elevated in 2025 to the High Court, Court of Appeal, and Federal Court.

The Malaysian Bar has full faith in your appointments.

Celebrating ASEAN

My Lord, I will begin with a cause for celebration. In 2025, Malaysia had the honour of Chairing ASEAN. For many in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, this first appeared as traffic diversions and road closures, but behind those notices Malaysia was steering the region with diplomacy and clear purpose.

Under the theme of Inclusivity and Sustainability, Malaysia hosted over 300 ASEAN meetings and guided substantive cooperation across political, economic and socio-cultural pillars. A significant milestone was Timor-Leste's formal accession as ASEAN's 11th member state, reflecting Malaysia's commitment to an inclusive region. Malaysia also helped facilitate the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord between Cambodia and Thailand, demonstrating ASEAN's capacity for constructive diplomacy.

Malaysia further championed environmental and sustainability issues, culminating in ASEAN's adoption of the Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment, signalling a collective regional commitment to environmental protection and climate action.

These achievements remind us that regional leadership must be matched by domestic alignment. To give meaning to such

commitments, our national laws must continue to strengthen environmental protection so that principles agreed at the regional level translate into tangible benefits for society.

Encouraging Mediation

Turning now to recent trends in the legal profession, in today's fast-evolving legal landscape, the practice of law is no longer limited to litigation and courtroom advocacy. Times are changing, and the legal profession must adapt by embracing alternative dispute resolution methods that are effective, efficient, and collaborative. Among these, mediation has emerged as a vital tool for resolving conflicts amicably, preserving relationships, and reducing the growing burden on our courts.

The Malaysian Bar welcomes and commends the Government for its initiative vis-à-vis the International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation Bill 2025. This is a significant and progressive step in strengthening Malaysia's commitment to mediation as a cornerstone of our dispute-resolution framework.

Central to the Bar's efforts in promoting mediation is the Malaysian International Mediation Centre (MIMC). Through MIMC, the Malaysian Bar provides a platform for high-quality, professional mediation services domestically and internationally. The Centre serves not only as a venue for resolving disputes efficiently but also as a hub

for training, capacity-building, and technical support, helping to cultivate a culture of dialogue and collaboration within Malaysia's legal framework.

The Malaysian Bar encourages all stakeholders, government, legal professionals, and the public alike, to continue supporting mediation as a constructive and forward-looking approach to resolving disputes. By embracing mediation and institutions such as MIMC, we reaffirm our commitment to a legal system that is not only fair and just but also adaptive, collaborative, and responsive to the needs of a modern society.

Pro Bono Culture

Pro bono work lies at the very heart of the legal profession's commitment to justice. It embodies the principle that access to legal services should not be determined by one's means, but by the pursuit of fairness, equality, and the public good.

It is in this spirit that I wish to highlight the MyBar Pro Bono Hub, developed by our Bar Council Human Rights Committee and was launched on December 2025. This platform strengthens access to justice by connecting volunteer law firms with civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations that require legal support for public interest matters. Traditional legal aid systems, though invaluable, cannot always reach every community due to

funding constraints, eligibility requirements, or scope limitations. The Hub fills this critical gap by matching vetted cases with experienced lawyers, empowering NGOs and CSOs to seek legal assistance, and promoting strategic litigation that drives systemic change.

The Hub focuses on constitutional law, public interest litigation, social justice advocacy, strategic lawsuits against public participation, and strategic litigation on policy and reform issues. It does not handle ordinary criminal defence or personal claims, except where such matters fall within defined human rights criteria and are referred by approved organisations. Its process is transparent, flexible, and open, allowing law firms to register in areas of their expertise and NGOs or CSOs to request support without any means testing.

By facilitating meaningful collaboration between the legal profession and civil society, the MyBar Pro Bono Hub embodies the Malaysian Bar's commitment to fostering a culture of pro bono work, advancing access to justice for marginalised communities, and ensuring that public interest causes receive the legal attention they deserve. In partnership with other initiatives, including the Bar Council Legal Aid Centres, the Hub ensures that no one is left behind in the pursuit of justice.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this initiative, for your vision, dedication, and tireless efforts. It is with great respect and fond remembrance that I dedicate this initiative to the memory of our late Bar Council member, Ravi

Chandran Subash Chandran, who passed away on 11 December 2025. Known for his unwavering commitment to legal aid and pro bono work, his legacy continues to inspire us in our mission to serve the public and uphold the principles of justice.

Fused Profession

My Lord,

There is an old story about a town built beside what everyone believed was a single river. For generations, the people thought the calm waters and the destructive floods came from the same source. Whenever the river overflowed or ran thin, blame was placed on that one river. No one imagined there could be more than one.

It was only much later that the elders discovered the truth. There were two rivers running side by side. They were so close that, from the surface, they looked like one. Yet each carried different strengths, different burdens, and required different rules. One flowed fast and clear from the mountains. The other carried soil and nutrients from the valley. Both sustained the town. Both were indispensable. The confusion arose only because they were treated as identical when, in truth, they were complementary.

That story mirrors the way our legal profession is often understood in Malaysia.

We practise within a fused profession. We are admitted as Advocates and Solicitors under one qualification. By habit and by structure, we treat the river as one. But in reality, they are two distinct streams flowing together.

Advocacy demands courage before the bench, clarity of persuasion, and a deep sense of responsibility to the court. Being a solicitor demands strategy, commercial understanding, preventive legal work, and risk management that quietly keeps businesses, institutions, and entire sectors functioning. They serve the same justice system, but they require different skills, different temperaments, and different forms of discipline.

When we fail to recognise this distinction, we do more than confuse roles. We diminish value.

This misunderstanding has consequences beyond professional identity. It affects how the legal profession itself is perceived by the State and by society.

In Semenanjung Malaysia alone, the Malaysian Bar comprises approximately 25,000 lawyers. This is not a narrow or uniform group. It is one of the largest and most influential professional communities in the country, cutting across wealth, power, ideology, and vocation.

Within this body are lawyers who are part of the highest income category in Malaysia, and at the same time, lawyers are running small practices, serving ordinary Malaysians, and carrying the daily

responsibility of access to justice. These realities coexist within the same profession, bound by the same admission, the same oath, and the same ethical framework.

Members of the Malaysian Bar are not confined to legal practice. Lawyers lead non-governmental organizations and civil society movements. They are deeply involved in policy advocacy, institutional reform, education, human rights, and governance. Many are active in politics, serving in Parliament in Dewan Rakyat and Dewan Negara, contributing directly to the making of laws and national policy.

Some members are no longer practicing, yet their impact on the nation is unmistakable. Former lawyers have served as Prime Ministers, Ministers, and Deputy Ministers. Others sit in legislative assemblies, chair statutory bodies, head public institutions, lead major organisations, and preside over boards at national and international levels.

The Malaysian Bar has produced presidents of professional bodies, chairpersons of institutions, regulators, policy architects, and strategic thinkers. These outcomes are not accidental. Legal training develops minds that understand structure, consequence, accountability, and the long view of nation building.

This is the real composition of the Malaysian Bar. Not a pressure group. Not a political bloc. Not an elite detached from society. But a profession whose members contribute to Malaysia in many different

ways, across many levels, often without visibility and often without recognition.

They facilitate commerce, protect capital, ensure compliance, resolve disputes, and give certainty to those who invest their resources and their trust in this country. When the system works, their contribution is taken for granted. When it fails, the cost is immediate and public.

Preventive and advisory legal work, however, can only be sustained where there is realistic recognition of its value. A system that rewards crisis litigation but undervalues early legal advice ultimately costs businesses more and undermines the long-term viability of legal practice.

Economic Value

Despite this, the legal profession is rarely spoken of as an economic contributor. It is seldom framed as part of the nation's growth story. More often, it is treated as a cost, a constraint, or a profession to be controlled rather than developed.

That framing matters.

Because when a profession is not seen as an asset, it is not invested in as one.

This perception has real consequences on the ground. It affects how legal fees are viewed, how professional work is valued, and whether

lawyers are paid promptly and fairly for the services they render. For many practitioners, particularly in small and medium firms, the challenge today is not prestige, but sustainability.

There is another truth we must acknowledge candidly.

When the Malaysian Bar offers observations or critiques, it does so from a position of professional responsibility and commitment to the long-term stability of our institutions. Constructive dialogue between stakeholders is an important part of strengthening governance and public confidence.

Checks and balances are not a nuisance. They are a stabilising force. Jurisdictions that command international respect are not those without criticism, but that where principled criticism is institutionalised and allowed to exist without fear.

When concerns are raised early, grounded in law and principle, long-term damage is often avoided. Investors understand this. International observers understand this. Legal certainty does not come from quietness. It comes from credibility.

Internationally, Malaysian lawyers are already recognised. They advise on cross-border transactions, appear in international arbitration, contribute to human rights discourse, Islamic finance, maritime law, and emerging commercial fields. They are trusted, competent, and ethical.

Malaysia has significant talent within the legal profession. A more deliberate national strategy to develop and project this capacity would position our legal services sector as a regional strength.

My Lord, the development of legal services also means recognising and strengthening the full breadth of talent within the profession. In this respect, women lawyers form a significant and rapidly advancing segment of the Malaysian Bar. They already lead firms, appear in complex commercial disputes, manage transactions, and contribute to public policy.

To build on this capacity, the Malaysian Bar has introduced the PowHER Leadership, Boardroom and Executive Track for Women Lawyers. This initiative equips women lawyers with the training and competencies required for senior roles including board positions, partnership management, and executive leadership. Such roles are strategic to the governance and commercial landscape of the nation.

The objective is not symbolic representation. It is to ensure that a profession entrusted with upholding justice is also contributing meaningfully to the nation's economic and institutional development through capable and diverse leadership.

Other jurisdictions have made a conscious decision to treat legal services as an export sector. Adopting similar approaches would allow Malaysia to compete more effectively in emerging commercial fields.

And yet, the potential is undeniable.

If we return to the river, fusion should not mean erasure. It should not collapse advocacy and solicitorship into a single blurred identity. When we confuse the streams, we weaken both. When we respect their differences, the profession becomes stronger, the courts are better served, and the public benefits.

The same is true of the relationship between the profession and the State. There is an opportunity for the Government of Malaysia to further recognise the legal profession not only as a regulated occupation but as a strategic partner in governance, economic development, and international positioning.

The Bar, for its part, must continue to uphold uncompromising standards of competence, ethics, and accountability. Independence must always come with responsibility. Criticism must remain principled, not performative.

But partnership requires more than tolerance. It requires trust. It requires an understanding that legal clarity, judicial independence, and professional integrity are not obstacles to growth, but conditions for it.

I do not pretend that this relationship is perfect. It is not. There are frustrations on both sides. There are moments of misunderstanding and mistrust.

But I stand here with a genuine hope that we can do better.

That this Legal Year will be one where the legal profession is not merely heard, but understood. Not managed, but valued. Not simply tolerated, but trusted.

Because a nation that truly believes in the rule of law must also believe in those who uphold it.

Conclusion

To conclude, as I stand here for the final time as President of the Malaysian Bar, I am reminded that this office is never about the individual who holds it. It is about the trust placed in the institution and the duty to honour that trust with clarity, honesty and restraint. The voice of the Malaysian Bar has weight, not because of who speaks it, but because it has long served as a compass in moments when direction is uncertain.

For that reason, our positions must always be rooted in integrity and a genuine commitment to the future.

As I conclude, I ask those entrusted with power in any sphere to pause and put aside the rivalries, disappointments, or personal grievances that can cloud even the best intentions. These things corrode quietly, and the cost is borne not by us alone but by those who will inherit the country we shape today.

Let us channel our energy towards building a Malaysia that gives our children a steadier path, a clearer system, and a fairer chance, a Malaysia where justice is not an aspiration but a lived reality.

Thank you, My Lord.

Dato' Mohamad Ezri b Abdul Wahab
President
Malaysian Bar