SPEECH BY:

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF MALAYSIA

DATUK SERI UTAMA WAN AHMAD FARID WAN SALLEH

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE LEGAL YEAR 2026

12 JANUARY 2026 | MITEC, KL

SALUTATIONS

My Brother and Sister Judges;

Your Excellencies;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

Bismillaahirrahmaanirrahim

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh dan salam sejahtera.

1. Marilah kita sama-sama menzahirkan kesyukuran ke hadrat Allah Subhanahu Wataala kerana dengan kurnia dan izin Nya dapat kita bersama-sama hadir pada hari ini bagi Majlis Pembukaan Tahun Perundangan 2026.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

2. As we gather this morning for the Opening of the Legal Year 2026, I would like to wish each and every one of you a very Happy New

Year. On behalf of the Malaysian Judiciary, I extend my sincere appreciation to all of you for honouring us with your presence at this annual landmark event.

3. I thank the Attorney General and the President of the Malaysian Bar for their preceding speeches.

4. On this occasion, allow me to also extend my heartfelt congratulations to The Right Honourable Justice Dato' Abu Bakar Jais on His Lordship's appointment as the President of the Court of Appeal, The Right Honourable Justice Dato' Hashim Hamzah as the Chief Judge of Malaya and The Right Honourable Justice Datuk Hajah Azizah Nawawi as the Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak. To each and every newly elevated Judge of the Federal Court, Court of Appeal and High Court together with the newly appointed Judicial Commissioners, you now carry not only authority, but expectations. I hope that you serve with distinction, compassion, and integrity to this institution and the nation.

5. To the former Chief Justice, Tun Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat, former President of Court of Appeal Tan Sri Datuk Amar Abang Iskandar bin Abang Hashim, former Chief Judge of Malaya Tan Sri Hasnah Mohammed Hashim, former Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Sebli and all judges who retired in year 2025, thank you. Those two words seem inadequate for what you've contributed, but they come from all of us with deep sincerity. Thank you for the years you dedicated to upholding justice. For the countless hours spent carefully considering evidence, weighing arguments, and crafting decisions that would stand the test of time.

6. Sitting here today, I am deeply conscious of both the privilege and the responsibility of this moment, as it marks my first Opening of the Legal Year as the Chief Justice.

7. Before I proceed further, I wish to place on record the Judiciary's sincere appreciation to His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the Government of Malaysia for the implementation of the 30 per cent salary increment, which has taken effect this month. This measure is both timely and significant. It is worth noting that this is the first adjustment in a decade since the last revision. Judges do not receive annual increments and are precluded from holding other offices or engaging in business. Seen in this context, this increment reflects a clear recognition of the demands placed upon judicial office and a meaningful commitment to strengthening the welfare of the Judiciary in support of a resilient, credible, and high-performing administration of justice. The increment is, in my opinion, contributes to promote the independence of the judiciary.

8. To my fellow brother and sister judges, enhanced remuneration must go hand in hand with heightened responsibility. Judicial office carries with it the expectation that judges will read extensively, remain abreast of legal and societal developments, equip themselves with new knowledge, and never cease learning. In a rapidly evolving legal landscape, continuous learning is not a choice—it is a duty.

9. Let me reiterate that a fairly compensated Judiciary serves as an important safeguard—helping to shield judges from undue

influence, encouraging capable legal minds to step forward in service, and allowing those who sit on the Bench to discharge their duties without undue financial concern.

10. In my first one hundred days in office, I have also indicated my intention to explore the possibility of introducing performance-based incentives for the Superior Court judges who demonstrate diligence, discipline, and sustained commitment to the timely discharge of their judicial duties. This practice is nothing new. It is adopted in certain comparable jurisdictions, including Singapore, and it is one that merits careful and principled consideration.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE: FROM PRINCIPLE TO REALITY

11. The theme of *access to justice* invites us to ask an honest question: Are our systems serving the people as effectively as they should?

12. While the pathways to resolving legal disputes may differ, true access to justice is characterised by independence, efficiency, accessibility, and responsiveness. Justice must not remain a distant ideal—it must be a lived reality.

13. As the Chief Justice, one of my guiding philosophies is this: the constitutional spirit embedded in our Federal Constitution must be reflected not only in our judgments, but also in the way we conduct ourselves as an institution. Access to justice is now further enhanced with the following initiatives.

Circuit Sittings Initiative

14. On the 27th of November 2025, we revived the Court of Appeal Circuit Sittings, with its first sitting held in Penang. This year, Insya Allah, we are planning to further expand this initiative to Kuala Terengganu, Johor Bharu, Miri and Tawau as well as holding Federal Court Circuit Sitting at the Kuantan High Court.

15. The significance of this development is two-fold. First, it ensures that access to justice is no longer confined geographically. Second, to create opportunity for professional growth within the legal community, especially for young and aspiring advocates.

16. In my maiden speech, I pledged my commitment to improving the standard of advocacy among our young lawyers. As we all know that appellate work has traditionally been concentrated in Putrajaya, a situation which limits exposure for young practitioners or chambering students living outside of Klang Valley. By bringing appellate hearings closer to regional Bars, our circuit sittings initiative further advances the cause of equal access to justice and opportunity and is not constrained by geographical factors.

Mobile Courts

17. The Mobile Courts or *Mahkamah Bergerak* initiative is one that the Judiciary holds close to its heart. It is not merely a programme of convenience, but a reaffirmation of a simple belief—that justice must reach those who have long found it furthest away.

18. It was born out of necessity, to serve communities in remote and interior areas where travelling to a courthouse was often an insurmountable challenge, and in places where no permanent court buildings existed.

19. These courts attend to applications for late registration of birth certificates, provide services of Commissioners for Oaths, and facilitate the attestation of documents, with plans to expand the programme to Peninsular Malaysia.

20. In May 2025, the Children's Mobile Court initiative was launched with three key components: the Vehicle for Meaningful Redress (VMR) to safely transport child victims and witnesses; the Victims' Nexus to Justice (VNEJ), a child-friendly mobile facility where children can give testimony remotely in a comfortable environment; and the Vehicle for Nationwide Justice (VNJ), a fully equipped mobile courtroom.

21. The VNEJ is specially designed with daybeds, pillows, books, toys, and anatomical dolls to help children express themselves comfortably while giving evidence, particularly in cases under the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017. Trained Victim Liaison Officers (VLO) support children throughout the process with care and compassion.

22. I am proud to share that this initiative has received international recognition. When I spoke at the International Conference on Justice in Riyadh last year, our Mobile Court programme was recognised by the global legal community as among the best

practices in the world. In cases involving sexual offences against minors, we take care of the witness every step of the way—from their home, throughout the journey, and into the courtroom.

23. For the current year, the Judiciary wishes to record its sincere appreciation to the Government for the allocation of RM5 million, which will enable the procurement of fifteen additional VNEJ units for deployment across the states.

24. This support from the Government, through the Minister of Law and Institutional Reform, is deeply appreciated. Through initiatives such as these of which we are grateful, access to justice is not merely promised, but meaningfully realised.

New Court Buildings

25. Beyond policies and plans, access to justice is often shaped by something very tangible—whether there is a courthouse within reach of the community.

26. In 2025, the Pengerang Court Complex was successfully completed and is now fully operational.

27. Similarly, in Kinabatangan, Sabah, a new court has been constructed to better meet the needs of the local population. Prior to 2009, residents of Kinabatangan were required to travel all the way to the Sandakan Court merely to file applications, as there was no court facility in the district.

28. Looking more broadly at our national development agenda, under the 12th Malaysia Plan, the general approach has been to prioritise the replacement of older, worn-out court buildings, so that judicial services remain safe and fit for purpose. This includes the Johor Bahru Court Complex and the Sik Court. In addition, a new court in Nilai will be constructed—marking the first court to be built there. On that note, a new Shah Alam Court Complex should also be seriously considered.

29. In Sarawak, progress continues steadily. The Mukah Court has completed renovation works to enable its relocation from a building shared with the State Government to a rented premises, with operations expected to commence this year. At the same time, construction of a new Sri Aman Court is scheduled to begin this year, with completion targeted for May 2029.

30. Meanwhile, in Sabah, I am pleased to share that the new Tenom Court will be launched next week. This relocation was both necessary and long overdue, as the previous premises were old, stuffy, and uncomfortable, with frequent electricity disruptions. Looking ahead, Sabah's development plan further includes the rollout of a new Sipitang Court this year.

31. Through these efforts, I remain hopeful that all identified projects will be completed in a timely manner.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

THE JUDICIAL BLUEPRINT: A DECADE OF PURPOSEFUL REFORM

32. Allow me now to move to the second theme of my speech: the Judicial Blueprint — a ten-year comprehensive reform plan that encompasses among others strengthening the rule of law, access to justice, transparency, institutional development, judicial efficiency, administration of justice, judicial leadership, the standard of advocacy especially amongst the young lawyers, and governance. While the tenure of any Chief Justice is necessarily finite, the reforms we set in motion must endure. It is my hope that the Judicial Blueprint I am about to announce will leave a lasting and meaningful imprint on the administration of justice.

33. The blueprint adopts the multi-door approach to the delivery of justice.

Rule of Law and capacity building

34. Promoting the rule of law is at the heart of the work of the judiciary. Sustaining and improving the capacity of courts and court administrations is one practical aspect of maintaining the rule of law.

35. In tandem with this theme, our Judicial Academy established under the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC), serves as the powerhouse of judicial excellence. I am pleased to announce on 22 August 2025, the Cabinet had approved the proposal to establish a dedicated and structured Judicial Academy for judges of the superior courts. On behalf of the Judiciary, I wish to record my deepest appreciation to the Government, in particular to the Right Honourable Prime Minister, and the Minister in charge of Law and

Institutional Reform, for the strong and unwavering support extended in ensuring the establishment of a dedicated and structured Judicial Academy is brought to fruition.

36. With the establishment of the Academy, the JAC is now in the final stage of obtaining approval for staffing positions and temporary premises before it can operate officially, which I anticipate will be towards the end of the first quarter of this year.

37. Writing judgments is part and parcel of judge craft. Our duty to give reasons for our decisions ensures that parties, especially those who are dissatisfied with the outcome, are able to understand why they won or lost their case. Where appropriate, they can exercise their right of appeal. I understand and I listen to the frustration of litigants who may wish to file an appeal, only to discover that the decision was delivered long ago but the written judgments are often not ready within the stipulated timeframe of eight weeks.

38. To address this, the Academy will first take a paternalistic approach of understanding the challenges faced by judges rather than penalising them.

39. Having said that, I am aware of the increasing number of the unwritten grounds of judgment at the High Courts. The former Lord President, Tun Suffian once remarked that a judge’s duty is to dispense justice without fear or favour. I would add that we must also dispense it without 'undue delay.' A judge who carries a backlog of 10 or more outstanding grounds of judgment is carrying a heavy

burden—not just for the system, but on their own conscience. You know who you are.

40. We will do everything in our power to assist those who are struggling. But we must be honest: there is a limit to assistance. The bench is a place for those who can stand the heat of the fire. I have to be fair to the litigants. I have to be fair to the Court of Appeal judges who cannot proceed with the appeal just because the grounds of the High Courts are not available. For the sake of the public who await our decisions, we cannot allow the machinery of justice to be clogged. To put it bluntly and I rarely say this: the kitchen is open, but the service must be timely. If the heat is no longer to your liking, the exit remains a dignified option.

Justice begins with wellbeing

41. The Honourable Andrew Bell, Chief Justice of New South Wales, once observed:

> *"The single greatest source of stress and pressure on the judiciary is the volume of work expected to be discharged by the State's judicial officers.".*

42. Those words resonate deeply with the experience of many within our Judiciary—not only judges of the superior courts, but also the lower courts, and judicial officers at every level who carry, day after day, the responsibility of deciding matters that affect lives, liberties, and livelihoods.

43. We are entrusted with immense responsibility. Long hours, emotionally demanding cases, complex legal questions, and the constant expectation of fairness and composure form part of our daily reality. These demands do not diminish with seniority, nor are they lighter in the lower courts, where caseloads are often heavier and the pace, unrelenting. Over time, this burden can accumulate—often unseen and rarely spoken about.

44. Judicial wellbeing, therefore, is not a peripheral concern. It goes to the very core of who we are as judges and judicial officers, and to the quality of justice we are entrusted to deliver.

45. Judicial wellbeing is an essential foundation of judicial independence, integrity, and sound decision-making. The Nauru Declaration on Judicial Wellbeing reminds us that the health and wellbeing of judges is inseparable from the quality of justice delivered to the public. It is for this reason that the Judiciary has formed a Judicial Well-Being Committee.

46. And we must also remember this: justice is never delivered by judges alone. Our judicial officers, registrars, and court staff stand alongside us every day, often under the same pressures and constraints. Their wellbeing is equally vital to the administration of justice. When those who serve the courts feel supported and valued, the entire system becomes stronger, more humane, and more resilient.

47. In caring for one another, we safeguard not only ourselves, but the integrity of the justice entrusted to us.

Technological innovation

48. The Judiciary began its journey towards the adoption of computing technology and digitalisation as early as 2009, with the aim of ensuring that the filing, registration, management, and hearing of cases could be carried out in a more orderly, efficient, and systematic manner. The Court's digital delivery system, known as the e-Kehakiman System, is accessible and usable by all stakeholders, including members of the public.

49. Taking into account the success and that the system has now been in operation for more than a decade, the Government has agreed to further develop, enhance, and upgrade the existing platform, and has approved the e-Kehakiman Phase 3 Project for a three-year period from 2025 to 2028.

50. Furthermore, in line with the Government's aspiration to develop and deploy artificial intelligence (AI) within public administration, the Judiciary is fully engaged in this project to study and explore the suitability of AI in case management, court proceedings, and judicial workflows. I hope that the relevant stakeholders will be able to develop AI solutions that are both appropriate and responsible, to assist the Judiciary in expediting the delivery of justice.

51. The secret to AI is 'Prompt Engineering'—asking the right question to get the right answer. I realised that's exactly what I've been doing for 10 years on the Bench. The only difference is that when I 'prompt' a lawyer, I don't get a response in two seconds. I usually get a request for an adjournment to next Tuesday. It is in this spirit that I

assure the Bar that AI will never replace Judicial Wisdom —mostly because an algorithm cannot yet understand the nuances of a witness's nervous cough or his body language.

The Appointment of Judges: A Pressing Institutional Imperative

52. As of today, the strength of the Superior Courts stands at 147 judges, comprising 14 Federal Court judges, 27 Court of Appeal judges, 68 High Court judges, and 38 Judicial Commissioners. At the subordinate court level, the administration of justice rests on 165 Sessions Court Judges and 170 Magistrates, bringing the total number of Sessions Court Judges and Magistrates to 335.

53. While these figures may appear substantial in isolation, they must be assessed against the sheer volume and complexity of cases flowing through the courts. The Lower Courts, in particular, serve as the first and primary point of contact for the public with the justice system. It is at this level that the burden of rising case registrations is most immediately and intensely felt.

54. Malaysia's continued economic development, socio-economic transformation, and evolving societal dynamics have led to a significant and sustained increase in case filings across all court levels. This growth has had a direct and cumulative impact on judicial workload—not only for judges of the Superior Courts, but especially for judicial officers serving as at the Lower Courts, who handle high-volume dockets under intense time pressure on a daily basis.

55. The statistics are telling. Between 2021 and November 2025, criminal case registrations rose from 1,522,005 to 2,486,567 cases, representing an increase of 63.37 per cent. Civil case registrations increased from 303,335 to 483,933 cases, an increase of 59.54 per cent over the same period. These figures reflect a structural trend rather than a temporary surge. Looking at it positively, a more litigious society is a society that has faith in its judiciary.

56. Despite these mounting pressures, judges and judicial officers at all levels continue to discharge their duties with professionalism, diligence, and commitment—trying their level best to ensure that cases are resolved within prescribed timelines. However, it must be said with candour, that efficiency cannot be sustained indefinitely without commensurate institutional support. There is a natural limit to how much additional workload can be absorbed without affecting wellbeing and quality of decision-making.

57. This challenge is further underscored when viewed in comparative perspective. Malaysia currently has one superior court judge for approximately 239,852 people, serving a population of about 36 million. By contrast, Australia has roughly one superior court judge for every 124,000 people, while Canada has approximately one judge for every 47,000 people. These jurisdictions maintain significantly higher judicial density, enabling faster case resolution and more sustainable workloads.

58. The implications are clear. The current shortfall in judicial manpower—both at the superior and subordinate court levels—places immense and growing pressure on the justice system. In

particular, the limited number of established posts or *perjawatan* for judicial officers has resulted in heavy caseloads for Sessions Court Judges and Magistrates, contributing to delays and uneven workload distribution across states and districts.

59. For these reasons, there is an urgent and pressing need for the Government to consider increasing the number *perjawatan* of judicial officers, especially those serving in the lower courts. Strengthening manpower at this level is not merely an administrative adjustment; it is a critical intervention to ensure that access to justice remains timely, effective, and meaningful for the public. For the superior court judges, as part of our broader action plan, JAC is reviewing proposals for additional appointments of judges and Judicial Commissioners and to suggest possible amendments to the Federal Constitution if the need arises.

60. In addition, we are also exploring the appointment of highly specialised practitioners as judges on a contractual basis, and the establishment of a standalone Commercial Court building in Kuala Lumpur, with the aim of strengthening judicial capacity in complex commercial matters.

<u>Building Confidence in Commercial Justice</u>

61. I am also pleased to announce that, this year, the judiciary will establish the International Commercial and Admiralty Division (ICAD) at the High Court of Kuala Lumpur. The establishment reflects a direction I consider both timely and necessary. I am aware that for businesses and investors, confidence in the courts plays a

real and practical role in deciding where to invest and how disputes are resolved.

62. Through ICAD, I intend to place greater emphasis on the effective management and expeditious disposal of commercial cases involving multinational and international companies. To me, this is a practical response to changing commercial realities. It is about ensuring that our courts remain relevant, responsive, and able to meet the expectations of those who place their trust in our justice system. If parties can be assured that their disputes will be managed fairly and efficiently, it strengthens confidence in Kuala Lumpur as a place to do business and to resolve disputes.

63. These initiatives, taken together, are intended to relieve systemic pressure, enhance judicial efficiency, and reinforce confidence, both domestically and internationally, in Malaysia's administration of justice.

Law Reform

64. Law reform is an integral pillar of the Judicial Blueprint, underpinning our efforts to ensure that the law remains responsive, coherent, and aligned with the needs of a modern society. Meaningful law reform forms an integral component of the Judicial Blueprint, serving not only to improve legal clarity and consistency, but also to strengthen public confidence in the justice system.

65. Amongst my plan under law reform is to address the backlog of family cases. To address this, we are exploring statutory measures

to expand the jurisdiction of Sessions Court judges to hear additional family court matters beyond joint petitions. This measure aims to increase judicial capacity to handle more complicated family matters in the High Court, which in turn improves the delivery system of family justice.

Establishment of a Committee to Study the Mechanisms for Regulating the Registration of New Cases in the Superior Courts and Subordinate Courts in Malaysia

66. Moving on would be the establishment of this Committee in early November last year, with the Right Honourable Justice Dato' Abu Bakar Jais, President of the Court of Appeal, serving as its Adviser.

67. The Committee is expected to recommend steps that help balance judicial workload and improve the effectiveness of the administration of justice. The key problem identified is that case filings are rising but the number of judges has barely changed, creating an imbalance of workload capacity. The study also flags judicial wellbeing, warning that sustained pressure can lead to fatigue, stress and burnout, which can affect the Judiciary as a whole.

68. The scope of study includes identifying ways to control new case registrations, which may involve reviewing jurisdiction limits, reviewing the threshold for leave to appeal, expanding mandatory ADR such as mediation, improving case-filtering before registration, and strengthening pre-trial case management. It also includes a full study of judicial workload and workload imbalance across all court

levels, supported by collecting and analysing statistics and survey data, plus any further appropriate study work.

69. The Committee will conduct an extensive study based on surveys and on-the-ground insights and will take place in two phases. In the first phase, we aim to have the interim research report by June this year. As to the second phase, we will finalise our findings by July next year.

Way Forward

70. As we look ahead, we will continue to refine and strengthen the Judicial Blueprint, guided by a clear commitment to ensure that no one is left behind in our pursuit of justice. What I have shared today is only the beginning. Much of this work is work in progress, shaped by careful study, consultation, and reflection.

71. Nevertheless, the Judicial Blueprint does not stand alone. At the operational level, the Strategic Plan 2026–2030 of the Chief Registrar's Office also serves as its practical counterpart. While the Judicial Blueprint sets the long-term direction, the Strategic Plan translates that vision into concrete and measurable initiatives.

72. By implementing this blueprint's judicial reforms with unwavering commitment, we plant the foundations for regaining World Bank recognition in rule of law and justice sector performance. The institutional strengthening, transparency mechanisms, and accountability frameworks we establish today, especially so post-Covid 19, will yield the international credibility we once enjoyed. As

we sow these principles of judicial excellence, so shall we reap the World Bank's renewed confidence in our legal system once more.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

THE QUIET BACKBONE OF JUSTICE: LEGAL RESEARCH AND JUDICIAL EXCELLENCE

73. Turning now to legal research and judicial excellence. Legal research is not a mere preliminary step; it is the backbone of sound judicial reasoning, particularly in the preparation of grounds of judgment. Behind every carefully reasoned decision lies hours of meticulous work — examining statutes, tracing precedents, analysing comparative jurisprudence, and reconciling competing legal principles.

74. It is therefore no coincidence that in established judiciaries such as those in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Singapore, judges place significant reliance on Law Clerks or Justices' Law Clerks, whose primary responsibility is to support this intensive research process. Their contribution, while seldom visible, is indispensable to the delivery of justice.

75. Under our current arrangement, we have Judicial Clerks within our in-house Judicial Clerkship Programme, they are stationed at the Research Division of the Chief Justice's Office. These Judicial Clerks are employed under the Malaysia Short-Term Employment Programme (MySTEP) for a one-year period. At the conclusion of their contracts, they may choose to apply for the Judicial and Legal

Service as L9-grade Legal Officers, or to pursue careers in private practice.

76. Regrettably, many of them do not remain beyond their short-term appointments. Limited remuneration and uncertain career prospects have led many to continue their professional journeys elsewhere.

77. In response, I have commissioned a proposal to elevate the status of Judicial Clerks to L9 Legal Officers on a two-year contract basis, with corresponding remuneration and allowances. This initiative is not simply about financial recognition. More importantly, it reflects our acknowledgment that legal research is a cornerstone of judicial excellence and that those who shoulder this demanding responsibility deserve proper institutional support.

78. The proposal has now been submitted to the relevant Government agency and is presently under review. We remain hopeful that this initiative will receive the Government's support as part of our shared commitment to strengthening the Judiciary.

THE BENCH, THE AGC AND THE BAR: THE CHARIOTS OF JUSTICE

79. An independent judiciary cannot exist in isolation. We do not operate in silos. We operate within a constitutional ecosystem in which the AGC and the Bar each play indispensable and distinct roles. While our functions differ, we are united by a shared commitment to the rule of law and the fair administration of justice.

80. Judges, by long-standing convention, do not respond to public comments or criticism; we speak through our written judgments. The AGC, as the principal legal adviser to the Government, plays a critical role in ensuring that matters brought before the courts are presented with professionalism, integrity, and respect for legal process. The Bar, in turn, represents the voice of litigants and the conscience of legal advocacy without fear or favour. Together, these three institutions—the Bench, the AGC, and the Bar—form the pillars upon which public confidence in the justice system rests.

81. Under my leadership, I am committed to fostering constructive and principled engagement with both the AGC and the Bar. Judges benefit from the assistance of well-prepared submissions and principled advocacy, just as prosecutors and counsel benefit from clear, reasoned judgments. This professional dialogue, conducted within proper constitutional boundaries, strengthens the quality of justice delivered.

82. At this juncture, I pause to ponder on the story of the two rivers told by the President of the Malaysian Bar a moment ago. I have just returned from a short break in Bangkok where a substantial portion of this speech is written. I remember standing by the banks of the Menam Chao Phraya last week, watching that ancient river flow with such quiet, unstoppable force, I was reminded of the nature of Justice. A river does not ask for permission to flow; it simply follows its course, carving its way through the landscape regardless of the obstacles placed in its path.

83. Judges are human too. Behind the robe, some of us get tired. And yes, we even sigh when faced with hundred-page written submissions, only to realise that the main points are in the last two pages, and, to add fuel to the fire, when counsel takes us on a scenic tour through the Swiss Alps and the Black Forests before finally arriving at the crux of the matter in their train of oral submissions. Yet, we must remain calm and composed to maintain court decorum.

84. Looking ahead, I am mindful that no blueprint, howsoever ambitious, can implement itself. Meaningful reform requires cooperation, goodwill, and sustained commitment from all stakeholders. The successful implementation of the initiatives outlined in this address depends on the collective efforts of judges, the AGC, the Bar, judicial officers, court staff, as well as the Executive and the Legislature.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

COLLABORATION BEYOND BORDERS

International Judicial Cooperation

85. In an increasingly interconnected world, the administration of justice can no longer be viewed through a purely domestic lens. Legal issues today—whether in commercial disputes, family matters, insolvency, or the protection of vulnerable persons—often transcend national borders. Against this backdrop, the Judiciary remains firmly committed to strengthening international judicial cooperation,

guided by mutual respect, shared values, and a common dedication to the rule of law.

86. Our closest and most developed judicial partnership is with Singapore. Through a series of Letters of Exchange between successive Chief Justices, both Judiciaries have reaffirmed their commitment to sustained and meaningful engagement. These instruments have paved the way cooperation in specialised areas of law, which include, cross-border corporate insolvency, and family justice. I am pleased to note that Malaysia will host the inaugural annual judicial exchange in family justice later this year.

87. Beyond Singapore, we continue to strengthen ties within the region and beyond. With Brunei Darussalam, a Memorandum of Judicial Cooperation signed in March 2024 has already borne fruit through judicial lecture series and attachment programmes for Bruneian judicial officers.

88. Our engagements with the State of Qatar, and Türkiye, promote exchanges of experience, judicial training, dialogue on developments in civil procedural law and exchange of best practices. In my recent meeting in Riyadh with HE Dr Najem Al-Zaid, the Vice Minister of Justice of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, we have agreed to improve bilateral judicial corporations.

89. We also value our long-standing engagement with England and Wales. I am pleased to inform that we had specialised training programmes hosted by the Judicial College of England and Wales in 2025, focusing on sexual offences against children, trafficking in

persons, vulnerable witnesses, judgment writing, case management, and judicial wellbeing. These programmes, conducted in close collaboration with the UK Ministry of Justice and the British High Commission, have enriched our judicial capacity and perspective.

Council of ASEAN Chief Justices

90. Since my appointment as the Chief Justice, I have had the privilege of engaging closely with our ASEAN judicial family, including my participation in the 12th Meeting of the Council of ASEAN Chief Justices (CACJ) held in Singapore last year.

91. At the end of the Meeting, we resolved on several key initiatives for future collaboration and development. To strengthen our regional legal fabric, we are simplifying how ASEAN court orders are authenticated and enforced. We are also prioritizing human dignity through new Trafficking in Persons protocols and mandating specialised training for the growing challenge of climate change litigation.

92. The Working Group on Judicial Education and Training will also continue preparations for the ASEAN Judicial Fellows Programme.

93. To prove Malaysia's continuous commitment to the future endeavours of the CACJ, I am proud to announce that Malaysia will host the CACJ Working Week this year and I look forward to warmly welcoming all delegates to Malaysia.

ASEAN Law Association

94. While the Judiciary's engagement through the CACJ remains a central pillar of our regional cooperation, I would also like to take a moment to personally acknowledge the important role played by the ASEAN Law Association, or ALA. The ALA provides a valued platform that brings together judges, members of the Bar, legal academics, and policymakers from across ASEAN to exchange ideas, share experiences, and learn from one another.

95. Last year, ALA Malaysia had the privilege of hosting the ALA Inaugural Lecture entitled "Gender Justice and Legal Pluralism in ASEAN". This occasion also marked the establishment of the ALA Standing Committee for Women in Law.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PATH AHEAD

96. Come August marks the first year of my tenure as the 17th Chief Justice of Malaysia. I accept this responsibility with humility and a deep sense of duty.

97. I firmly believe that our people are our greatest asset – the human capital. If we were to deliver justice effectively, we must ensure that our institution is supported by adequate human resources and a culture that genuinely values its people. To this end, our judges, Judicial Officers and court staff must never feel undervalued,

overstretched or unappreciated. Their wellbeing and morale are essential to the quality of justice we deliver. To all Judicial Officers and court staff, I speak from the bottom of my heart. During my state visits last year and I have visited all the states, I witnessed first-hand your dedication, professionalism, and quiet perseverance. Your contributions often go unseen, but they are deeply felt. Each of you deserves recognition and sincere appreciation.

98. You are the backbone of our legal system. You are the wheel that drives the Judiciary forward with purpose and momentum. Without your commitment, our judicial initiatives would remain mere plans on paper—blueprints gathering dust.

99. I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to the AGC, the Malaysian Bar and all legal stakeholders for your continued support and constructive engagement. May our *silaturrahim* continue to flourish, grounded in mutual respect and a shared commitment to justice. To my brother and sister judges, let us continue to serve with courage, wisdom, and integrity. Let us not fail those who place their trust in us.

100. On my way to this magnificent building this morning, I could not help but glanced at the Menara Merdeka 118, the 2nd tallest building and structure in the world, only behind Burj Khalifa in Dubai. If the Chao Phraya represents the *flow* of justice, Merdeka 118 represents its *stature*. Like that imposing building, the Independence of our Judiciary must be towering. It must be the first thing a citizen sees when they look for protection, and the last thing that yields to the storms of political pressure. It does not lean; it does not waver; and

it certainly does not apologise for its height. Remember, justice does not announce itself, it simply arrives.

101. Before I close allow me to share a short reply to Tan Sri AG's *pantun*:

Bawa bunga ke dalam pekan,
Jemput penghulu untuk makan,
Mana jahat kita tinggalkan,
Mana adil kita tegakkan.

102. Once again, I wish each and every one of you a Happy New Year. May the year 2026 bring you good health, renewed purpose, and abundant opportunities.

Thank you very much.