

**SPEECH BY**

**THE HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE  
DATO SERI PADUKA STEVEN CHONG**

**OPENING OF THE LEGAL YEAR 2026**

**THURSDAY, 22 JANUARY 2026**

Yang Berhormat Pehin Datu Lailaraja Major General (Rtd) Dato Paduka Seri Haji Awang Halbi bin Haji Mohd Yussof, Minister at the Prime Minister's Office and Minister of Defence  
II

The Honourable Attorney General,

Yang Amat Arif/Yang Berhormat Chief Syarie Judge,

Yang Mulia Deputy Minister for Security and Law, Prime Minister's Office,

Vice President of the Law Society,

Members of the Bar,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. On behalf of the Judiciary, I wish to thank you for joining us today as we gather to mark the Opening of the Legal Year 2026. This ceremony provides an opportunity for us all to reaffirm our shared commitment to upholding the rule of law in Brunei Darussalam, to reflect on our progress over the past year and to outline our priorities for the year ahead.
2. As we begin a new legal year, we are mindful of the trust and responsibility placed upon the courts in the administration of justice. We are fortunate to enjoy a Judiciary whose independence is both recognised and firmly entrenched. Judicial decision-making and appointments are made free from external pressure or influence, thereby upholding the rule of law and reinforcing public confidence in our courts – both at home and abroad.
3. The Judiciary remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring the efficient, effective, impartial and fair administration of justice and in the promotion of access to justice, in service of all who come before the court.

4. In supporting Brunei Darussalam's Vision 2035, the Judiciary also plays a vital role in supporting the country's diversification efforts and in attracting foreign investment. An efficient, effective and competent Judiciary that resolves commercial disputes promptly fosters confidence among investors and businesses. When parties can rely on the courts to enforce contracts, uphold the rule of law, and deliver timely and fair decisions, it creates a stable and predictable business environment. Such judicial integrity and efficiency reduce commercial risks, encourage entrepreneurship, and signal to the global business community that the country is a trustworthy and attractive destination for investment.
5. Data from the World Bank indicates that as of 2023, Brunei Darussalam's rule of law percentile rank is 79%. This means that Brunei Darussalam scores higher than approximately 79% of all other countries worldwide in terms of perceived rule of law in the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police and the courts. This reflects a strong rule of law environment and compares favourably with regional counterparts such as Singapore (98%), Japan (92%), Hong Kong SAR (88%) and South Korea (86%), and highlights Brunei Darussalam's commitment to upholding justice and the rule of law. With this in mind, please allow me to share what work has been undertaken by the Judiciary in the past year in support of these commitments.

## **II. KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2025**

### **A. JCMS 2.0 and Progress Made on Reforms**

6. In 2025, we commenced the development phase of the upgraded Judiciary Case Management System (JCMS 2.0) which will continue on throughout 2026. We are targeting the system's launch in 2027, which will mark a significant step forward in the enhancement of court services online to meet the needs and expectations of court users.

7. We have continued to advance our Civil Procedure reforms, with ongoing studies led by the Acting Chief Registrar and High Court Registrars to review the entirety of our Rules of the Supreme Court. Studies have focused on comparing our existing rules with Singapore's Rules of Court 2021, identifying areas where reforms can enhance efficiency and access to justice by simplifying procedures, supporting digitalization, facilitating case management, encouraging alternative dispute resolution and promoting proportionality relative to case complexity and value. In support of these future reforms, practice directions and circulars will be issued to ensure a smooth transition as these changes are progressively introduced.
  
8. Progress has also been made in relation to Insolvency reforms. A committee has been formed comprising of the Official Receiver and Deputy Official Receivers to review the existing bankruptcy and insolvency framework and procedures. The most recent findings from the survey given to members of the Law Society have shown that there is broad consensus that the current regime is dated and would benefit from reform, particularly in relation to enforcement, procedural efficiency and the limited availability of mechanisms for business rehabilitation. There is strong support for studying comparative models, including Singapore's insolvency framework, while ensuring that any reforms are adapted to Brunei Darussalam's legal and economic context. These insights have guided the committee's ongoing work as it develops its proposals to modernise and strengthen the insolvency regime to ensure it remains effective and responsive to commercial realities.
  
9. On a related note, at the end of 2025 the Official Receiver's Chambers has introduced a pilot project to improve access to justice across the country by conducting creditors' meetings at the district courts. The initiative aims to reduce travel time, and improve accessibility as judgment debtors are able to attend proceedings at the Tutong and Kuala Belait district courts via video conferencing while the Deputy Official Receiver and counsel participate from the Supreme Court in the capital.

10. Meanwhile in the area of family justice, dedicated working groups have been established to review divorce and adoption proceedings in the High Court and processes in the Juvenile Court. Key initiatives include reviewing and expanding the appointment of the Panel of Advisers for the Juvenile Court, introducing counselling as an integral component of divorce proceedings, and enhancing pre-adoption processes particularly for unrepresented applicants. These reforms reflect a continued focus on a child-centered, multi-disciplinary approach that promotes early intervention and the long-term welfare of families within the justice system. The working groups are developing the reforms in close consultation with relevant agencies and support services in order to address underlying family issues and achieve sustainable outcomes for families who come before the court.

## **B. International Relations**

11. The Judiciary recognises that judicial cooperation is important as a means of enhancing institutional capacity, promoting the rule of law and sharing best practices. In the past year, we continued to strengthen relationships with our counterparts abroad through a number of international and regional engagements.

12. In February 2025, a significant milestone was marked with the signing of a renewed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on judicial cooperation between our Supreme Court and the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China. The renewed MOU updates the Memorandum of Cooperation first signed in 2004 and aims to strengthen communication, collaboration and cooperation on matters relating to dispute avoidance and dispute resolution. We were honoured to have the signing ceremony witnessed by His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China.

13. Following the signing of the MOU, we continued our engagement with the People's Republic of China and attended the signing ceremony of the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed) presided over by His Excellency Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of

China in May 2025. The Convention establishes the world's first inter-governmental organisation dedicated to international mediation. On the side-lines of the signing ceremony, I attended the Global Forum on International Mediation with panels on key themes such as international investment and commercial dispute mediation, reflecting the growing prominence of mediation in the international legal landscape.

14. In February 2025, I represented our Judiciary at the Pacific Judicial Conference held in Auckland, New Zealand. Hosted by the Chief Justice of New Zealand, The Rt. Hon. Dame Helen Winkelmann together with the New Zealand Judiciary, the conference brought together Chief Justices, judges and judicial officers from across the Pacific to engage in discussions on judicial independence and the rule of law, the future shape of courts, the use of technology and judicial appointments.

15. In September 2025, we made an official visit to the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia in Melbourne, where we were warmly received by Chief Justice William Alstergren AO and senior members of the Court. Our discussions focused on court and judicial administration, case management, court-annexed mediation and the role of registrars, as well as initiatives to support self-represented litigants, with particular attention given to the Court's Family Dispute Resolution mechanisms and Family Advocacy and Support Services in safeguarding vulnerable parties. The visit reaffirmed our shared commitment to strengthening judicial cooperation under the Australia–Brunei Plan of Action 2024–2027, and provided a valuable platform to identify opportunities for professional exchanges, judicial education and the sharing of best practices. As part of the programme, we also visited the Children's Court of Victoria and the College of Law, gaining insights into child-centred justice, restorative practices, continuing legal education and accredited mediation programmes.

16. Judicial engagement with the United Kingdom (UK) has continued to thrive. In February 2025, we were privileged to have The Rt. Hon. Lord Hodge, Deputy President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (JCPC) deliver lectures in Brunei Darussalam on 'The Impact of the

Supreme Court on the Wider Economy’ and ‘The Work of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council’. The lectures drew wide participation from across the legal fraternity and are of great significance given the JCPC’s role as the final court of appeal for civil matters in our jurisdiction.

17. In May 2025, through our collaboration with the UK’s International Law Book Facility (ILBF), we received a generous shipment of legal text books as well as legal reference books, which are now housed in the Supreme Court library and available to judges, practitioners and students. These resources greatly enrich our library’s collection and provide us with up to date materials which can assist with legal research and practice. I wish to record my appreciation to the ILBF for their efficient coordination and we look forward to continuing this partnership. In October 2025, we joined the Judiciary of England and Wales in their International Judicial Mentoring Programme (I-JUMP) 2025-2026, in which four of our judges are paired with mentor judges from England and Wales. I am confident that the I-JUMP programme will strengthen our professional networks and facilitate mutual learning among our judges.

18. The Brunei Darussalam-UK judicial cooperation culminated in a series of meaningful judicial and professional visits in the United Kingdom in October 2025 where I made an official visit to the Honourable Society of Lincoln’s Inn, where we were warmly received by the Treasurer, Sir Paul Morgan, the Under Treasurer, Ms Emma Hopkins OBE, and Senior Benchers of the Inn, as well as the Master of the Rolls, The Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Vos. The visit provided an occasion to reflect on the longstanding ties between Brunei Darussalam’s legal fraternity and Lincoln’s Inn, which has shaped generations of our advocates and judges, including myself. We also discussed avenues for future cooperation in advocacy training, continuing professional development and the strengthening of professional and ethical standards.

19. I was also honoured to attend the Opening of the Legal Year in England and Wales, marking my second attendance at the ceremony, and had the opportunity to have bilateral meetings with The Lady Chief Justice of England and Wales, The Rt. Hon.

Dame Sue Carr and The Rt. Hon. Lord Hodge, Deputy President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council to explore ongoing and prospective areas of judicial cooperation and reaffirming our shared commitment to judicial independence and the rule of law.

20. The Judiciary continued its close cooperation with our close regional partners, Malaysia and Singapore through the 8<sup>th</sup> Joint Judicial Conference held in May 2025 in Singapore, themed ‘Building a Future-Ready Judiciary’. Discussions focused on access to justice and technology, cross border disputes and judicial education.

21. Attachment programmes with both the Malaysian and Singapore Judiciaries were undertaken by our judicial officers in 2025, which provided valuable opportunities for them to observe court processes, case management practices and judicial administration at close quarters. These programmes are professionally enriching and contribute meaningfully to the development of our officers and I wish to record our sincere appreciation to the Federal Court of Malaysia and the Singapore Judiciary for their hospitality and willingness to share their experience and expertise. It truly reflects the strength of our institutional relationships and underscores our shared commitment to judicial excellence, mutual learning and the close and enduring ties between our jurisdictions.

22. Judicial education and cooperation were further strengthened through the Brunei–Malaysia Judicial Lecture Series, held pursuant to the Memorandum of Judicial Cooperation signed in 2024. The first lecture was held in March 2025, focusing on principles of judgment writing, and was followed by a second lecture in November 2025 addressing ‘Sexual Offences Against Children’. These sessions brought together judges and judicial officers from both Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia and facilitated practical exchanges on judicial reasoning, writing, and the handling of sensitive cases involving vulnerable witnesses.

23. We continued to engage with other judiciaries multilaterally and reaffirmed our commitment to regional judicial cooperation through the Council of ASEAN Chief Justices (CACJ) and the ASEAN Law Association (ALA) where I represented our Supreme Court at the 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the CACJ and my colleague Judicial Commissioner Muhammed Faisal bin Pehin Datu Juragan Laila Diraja Dato Seri Pahlawan Haji Kefli in his capacity as Chair of ALA Brunei National Committee attended the 46<sup>th</sup> ALA Governing Council Meeting, both hosted in Singapore in November 2025.

24. In September 2025, the Supreme Court of Brunei Darussalam was formally admitted as a member of the Judicial Dispute Resolution Network (JDRN) which comprises of judiciaries from across the common law and civil law traditions. This reflects our commitment to early, fair and cost-effective dispute resolution through proactive judicial case management and court-connected ADR and I am pleased to inform that we will be participating in our first JDRN meeting in Manila in January 2026. We are also working towards membership of the Standing International Forum of Commercial Courts (SiFoCC), with the intention of joining in 2026.

### **C. Joint Legal Affairs Committee (JLAC)**

25. The Joint Legal Affairs Committee (JLAC) continued its efforts over the past year through its working groups and I would like to record my appreciation to the Committee for their continued engagement and constructive collaboration.

26. Progress has been made on amendments to the Legal Profession Act and Legal Profession Rules, with final drafts of the amendments already prepared by the Legislative Drafting Division of the Attorney General's Chambers.

27. I am pleased to inform that the Committee has completed the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Personal Injury Award Guidelines in Brunei Darussalam and has also endorsed a pilot project for a Court Friends Scheme aimed at improving access to justice. The pilot project will be implemented for a 3-month period in mid-2026, involving law students

providing limited non-legal procedural support to litigants in person in the Magistrates Court civil mentions and the Small Claims Tribunal.

28. The Committee also advanced its work on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and will be drafting a self-monitoring CPD framework to support proportionate and practical compliance by counsel.

29. On the whole, these initiatives reflect JLAC's role in supporting reforms that strengthen professional standards, enhance court processes, and maintain public confidence in the justice system

#### **D. Statistics**

30. I will now briefly turn to the past year's statistics. In terms of the Judiciary's caseload in 2025, data has shown that filings in the Court of Appeal saw a modest decline in both civil and criminal matters compared to 2024, while the High Court recorded an increase in civil case filings and a broadly stable criminal caseload. The Intermediate Court continued to manage a significant volume of work, particularly in commercial cases, which remained high, alongside a slight increase in criminal matters. The Magistrate's Courts hold the largest share of the Judiciary's caseload, with notable increases in criminal filings across all districts, while Road Traffic cases declined overall.

31. Bankruptcy and insolvency related filings remained significant in 2025, with a high number of receiving orders, adjudication orders and company winding up orders granted. The Probate Registry continued to see a steady amount of applications for letters of administration and probate received and granted. The Civil Marriage Registry recorded a marked increase in the registration of marriage applications, and conversely there was a decline in the number of divorce petitions received. Overall, the statistics illustrate the breadth of the Judiciary's work and the sustained demand placed on court services and resources.

### **III. KEY INITIATIVES FOR 2026**

32. Looking ahead, please allow me to outline the Judiciary's focus in the coming year with an emphasis on student engagement and internships, juvenile justice reform, AI guidelines for court users, and guidelines for the admission of advocates and solicitors.

#### **A. Student engagement and internships**

33. The Judiciary has a responsibility to help inform and educate the public about what judges and judicial officers do. As part of our initiative for outreach to the youth, I am pleased to announce that we are exploring the launching of a pilot 'Open Day in Court' programme designed as an educational seminar run annually for upper secondary school and sixth form students. The programme would aim to introduce students to the role of the courts, the justice system and the importance of the rule of law in everyday life with a focus on topics relevant to young persons who may have an interest in studying law. By providing students with early exposure to the justice system, it is my hope that we can promote legal awareness, civic responsibility and foster greater understanding of the work of the courts.

34. We are also considering the introduction of a pilot biannual Judicial Internship Programme, which would offer short-term, structured internships for undergraduate law students and recent law graduates, providing supervised exposure to court processes and legal research. Interns would be attached to judges and judicial officers and would participate in guided learning activities, including case observation, research assignments and briefings. By nurturing early interest in the work of the Judiciary, it is my hope that we can help develop future legal talent and offer exposure to judicial work and the realities of court proceedings.

35. Our student engagement and internship initiatives will be led by the Acting Chief Registrar with support from our Corporate Affairs Unit and both programmes will be implemented on a limited basis to assess capacity and impact before any wider roll-out.

## **B. Reforms in Juvenile Justice**

36. Just as there is a need to educate the youth and support student engagement, there is also a need for reforms in juvenile justice, with a framework focused on rehabilitation and reintegration and an emphasis on early intervention and restorative outcomes.
37. For juvenile criminal offences, I would suggest that consideration be given to diversionary measures such as warnings, cautions and Youth Justice conferences, before prosecution is pursued, with restorative practices preferred over punitive responses. I would also suggest that spent convictions are looked into, so that certain past offences committed by young persons, after a period of good behaviour, do not result in a lifelong criminal record and supports rehabilitation by enabling the young person to move forward without lasting stigma.
38. In beyond parental control cases, I would support allowing the courts to link families with counselling and community-based welfare support and services. Whereas for care and protection cases involving abuse or neglect, I would advocate for a multi-disciplinary, family-inclusive approach to be adopted. Extended family members, community stakeholders and professionals would work together to agree on a safety plan for the child, after which the court would work with welfare services to provide counselling, mentoring, rehabilitation and ongoing supervision to secure after care and welfare safeguards.
39. To support the effective implementation of these reforms, the Acting Chief Registrar will establish an inter-agency committee comprising of the Attorney General's Chambers, Royal Brunei Police Force, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, the Law Society and other relevant agencies, reflecting a coordinated, child-centred approach to juvenile justice.

## **C. Guidelines on use of AI for court users**

40. Following the issuance of guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for judicial officers in 2025, steps also need to be taken to address the responsible use of AI by court users. The Acting Chief Registrar is tasked with preparing guidelines for court users, including lawyers, on the appropriate use of AI. The objective of these guidelines is to support the ethical, professional and responsible deployment of AI, while recognising its potential benefits in enhancing efficiency and facilitating access to justice. The guidelines will reaffirm the fundamental duty of lawyers to ensure that all materials placed before the court, including any content generated or assisted by AI, are verified, accurate, truthful and appropriate. These measures reflect the Judiciary's commitment to embracing technological innovation in a principled manner that upholds the integrity of the judicial process.

#### **D. Guidelines for the admission of advocates and solicitors**

41. I invite the Law Society to review its current guidelines on references for admission to the Bar following the judgment of the Court of Appeal in Civil Appeal No. 1 of 2025 between The Law Society of Brunei Darussalam and Marie Rita Leslie. In particular, consideration should be given to the requirement that a referee must have known the applicant for a least two years where the applicant has been practising overseas, as well as the need for clear guidance on the use of referees who are related to, or closely connected with the applicant. The Acting Chief Registrar may assist the Law Society through the JLAC in drafting these guidelines.

#### **IV. APPRECIATION**

42. In concluding these remarks, please let me acknowledge some changes to the Judiciary in the past year. I extend my deepest appreciation to Justice Conrad Seagroatt, who retired last year after many years of distinguished service to Brunei Darussalam as Justice of the Court of Appeal. Justice Seagroatt has made many valuable contributions to our Judiciary. We were fortunate to have benefited from his wealth of experience and skills and it has been my privilege and pleasure to work with him. I wish him all the best on his retirement.

43. Meanwhile, our Judiciary continues to grow in strength and I am pleased to welcome to the Bench Hajah Izzatul Faizah binti Dr Haji Mohamad, a Sultan's Scholar, who will take up her duties sitting as a Registrar in the High Court. I am also pleased to inform that Registrar Pengiran Siti Nursu'aidah binti Pengiran Jufrizar @ Pengiran Tajuddin, has successfully graduated with the Master of Laws in Judicial Studies at Singapore Management University in August 2025. We congratulate her on this achievement, which reflects the Judiciary's continued emphasis on continuing professional development and judicial capacity-building. Our congratulations also go to our three judicial officers who successfully completed the Strategic Conflict Management for Professionals course in December 2025 and are now accredited mediators of the Brunei Darussalam Arbitration Centre and join our panel of experienced court mediators.

44. I extend my congratulations to Dato Seri Paduka Haji Ahmad bin Pehin Orang Kaya Laila Setia Bakti Di-Raja Dato Laila Utama Haji Awang Isa on his appointment as President of the Law Society and I look forward to strengthening the partnership between the Bench and the Bar. I wish to thank past President Haji Mohammad Zainidi bin Haji Abdul Hamid for his valuable contributions whilst in office, during which he oversaw many initiatives under the JLAC and developed a constructive and productive relationship amongst members of the Committee.

45. I would also like to place on record the Judiciary's appreciation to all those who have assisted in the conduct of disciplinary proceedings and offered their time and expertise to support the work of the legal profession. I am grateful for their service, as their work plays a vital role in upholding professional standards, maintaining public confidence and preserving the integrity of the profession.

46. In closing, I return to the themes with which I began. The initiatives and reforms I have outlined today reflect the Judiciary's continued commitment to the efficient, effective, impartial and fair administration of justice. These efforts are firmly aligned to the wider aspirations set out in Brunei Darussalam's Vision 2035 and achieving these goals

require sustained effort, and collaboration between stakeholders and across institutions. The effective administration of justice is a collective undertaking across our community and I would like to express my appreciation to our judges, judicial officers, court staff and personnel, as well as members of the Bar, Attorney General's Chambers, law enforcement agencies, together with all those who engage with the courts in the course of their professional duties. I thank you for your service and dedication to upholding the rule of law and serving the interests of justice in Brunei Darussalam.

47. Lastly, I wish to record my appreciation to the Opening of the Legal Year organizing committee for their meticulous preparations for today's ceremony. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the Prime Minister's Office, the State Judiciary Department, the Department of Adat Istiadat Negara, the Department of Environment, Parks and Recreation and the Accident and Emergency Department of RIPAS Hospital for their invaluable assistance and continued support. My appreciation further goes to the Royal Brunei Police Force for the Guard of Honour Parade, whose presence serves as a meaningful reminder of the police force's important role within the justice system.

48. Thank you very much and I extend my best wishes to all for good health and success in the year ahead.