

ASEAN LECTURE SERIES

“Unity in Diversity”

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Opening Section

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Tan Sri-Tan Sri, Dato'-Dato'

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to take this opportunity to express appreciation to the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) and Institute of ASEAN Studies and Global Affairs (INSPAG), Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) for inviting me to speak at this year's ASEAN Anniversary Lecture. I must also take this opportunity to appreciate the work of IDFR, UiTM and the ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in continuing the tradition of organizing this event annually. The convening of this event is a testimony of a concerted effort by the Government and Academic sector in raising awareness on ASEAN at national level.

2. Allow me to reflect on the theme of this event, which we share with this year's ASEAN Day –" Unity in Diversity". Our theme seeks to reflect two very distinct ideas in it. "Unity" refers to oneness, wholeness, or of being formed of parts that make a whole, essentially around a consensus of shared values as they relate to the whole state. "Diversity" on the other hand refers to variety and difference. Our theme "Unity in Diversity" suggests a harmonious and peaceful community consisting of individuals from different backgrounds. It could also be seen as a call for homogeneity among the people of ASEAN.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. In the process of enhancing and developing ASEAN as a competent and credible regional body, in 2009, ASEAN has set itself a goal of achieving an ASEAN Community by the year 2015. The signing of the Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community (2009-2015) is a testimony of ASEAN's aspiration to realize an ASEAN Community based on the three pillars, namely, the ASEAN political-security, economic, and socio-culture community. The Roadmap, amongst others, shall be a means by which ASEAN can promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society, regardless of gender, race, religion, language or social and cultural background. It is aimed at contributing towards realizing a Community that is people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN. Implementing this Roadmap is one of the ways where ASEAN can forge a common identity and build a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious where the well being, livelihood, and welfare of the people are taken care of.

4. Since ASEAN's inception, the organization has taken steps to instill the "ASEAN Identity" as a way to bring the people of Southeast Asia together. Such identity can be seen through the introduction of various elements, such as the ASEAN Flag and the ASEAN Anthem. The ASEAN Flag for example, symbolizes a stable, peaceful, united and dynamic ASEAN, with stalks of paddy in the middle representing all ASEAN Member States that are bound together in friendship and solidarity. This, ladies and gentlemen clearly shows what the people before us envisages – a united ASEAN and let me add, a prosperous and progressive ASEAN.

5. Building a unified ASEAN Community requires its people to be aware of the importance and benefit of having such community entails. The public need to realize the implication and opportunities that the ASEAN Community will bring for them to appreciate the benefits of an integrated ASEAN. Steps that have been taken to make ASEAN a people-centered organization, is most welcomed in achieving this goal.

6. At national level, we continue to undertake efforts to educate the public on ASEAN. Public awareness programs takes the form of television and radio talks, publications in printed media, inviting representatives of public and private institutions to attend ASEAN-related events, as well as organizing outreach programs at states throughout the country. These approaches will hopefully raise awareness on ASEAN amongst our people while instilling the sense of “oneness” in them. In addition to the Government’s unremitting and diligent efforts, other sectors in the society particularly the private sector corporations and the civil society organizations must play a helping hand to the Government in ensuring the effective public outreach. The greater inclusion of civil society organizations as an important stake holder in the ASEAN Community project is imperative for the successful attainment of this objective. At the same time, it is important for the public to realize the benefit and opportunities that the ASEAN Community will bring for them to better appreciate the need for an integrated ASEAN.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. A wide-ranging and effective communications network is a powerful and effective tool that could be utilized in indoctrinating the “ASEAN Identity” among the people of this region. In recent years, the region has seen significant developments on the communication infrastructure. Despite this encouraging development, we have to recognize the fact that there is still a lot of work to be done to improve our communication infrastructure. ASEAN has put the development of the region’s infrastructure as one of its main agenda in recent years. The adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity by the ASEAN Leaders in October last year for example, demonstrates the commitment by ASEAN to enhance connectivity in the region, spanning the physical, institutional and people-to-people aspect. Enhanced connectivity would open up the region

and its people to a whole new level of people-to-people interaction, which is one essential element in promoting tolerance amongst the ASEAN people.

8. I should also emphasize that promoting unity and tolerance among the people of ASEAN should begin at a young age. In order to ensure sustainability of the region in the long run, providing education to the young, particularly the youths in ASEAN, must be on the top of the list of agendas for ASEAN Member States to pursue. Education can be an effective medium that can be used to inculcate this sentiment to our younger generations. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, for example, contains a number of actions on the promotion of unity through the education. Such goal are to be achieved by organizing programs which includes the introduction of ASEAN elements in the syllabus of education institutes, cultural exchange and student transfer program.

9. In this respect, the work done by institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA's Institute of ASEAN Studies, Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (FSPPP), in promoting this objective at the level of institutions of higher leanings is commendable. Since its establishment in 2004, the Institute has been very active in conducting regular academic, research, publication and other people-to-people oriented programmes, individually or in collaboration with other public and private sector partners, in support of the ASEAN Community project and the ASEAN Vision 2020 agenda. Today's jointly organized ASEAN Anniversary lecture, which has become a yearly signature event between UiTM and IDFR, represents another example of the ongoing effort to promote greater consciousness of the ASEAN unity project among the public and students of tertiary level institutions in the country. It is hoped that similar initiatives could also be replicated by other institutions of higher leanings to complement ongoing Government effort to promote the objective at the national level.

10. As regard to IDFR, it is quite well known that it has been actively involved in promoting friendship and linkages among diplomats from the ASEAN countries and beyond through its diplomatic training programmes under the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) and also through funding from third parties like the ASEAN Secretariat and the Commonwealth Secretariat. I am particularly gratified to hear that IDFR has been organizing the "Forum for ASEAN Young Diplomats" with funding from the Republic of Korea since 1999. It

signifies the popularity of the course among the up and coming diplomats of the region and the close relations between the sponsor country and Malaysia and with ASEAN.

11. Initiated under the concept of “prosper thy neighbour”, IDFR also organizes about 5 to 6 international courses each year under the MTCP, which I have been told, have been very well attended by diplomats from our ASEAN neighbours. In my view, the opportunity for our diplomats to meet through training courses such as those provided by IDFR and the popularity of these courses augurs well for better understanding, friendship and networking among our diplomats in the ASEAN region.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. Another unifying tool that should be given due attention is sports. There is no denying the enormous potential that sports have in unifying people. In order to benefit from this potential, ASEAN has given sports a more prominent community-building role, amongst others by establishing a dedicated ASEAN body on sports at ministerial level. The envisaged body seeks to, amongst others, encourage more interaction among people of ASEAN while contributing to ASEAN integration and community building process.

13. On a related matter, earlier this year, ASEAN Member States have agreed to embark on an ambitious endeavor, i.e. to work towards the hosting of the FIFA World Cup by ASEAN in the year 2030. I observe that this idea has generated a great deal of enthusiasm from the public and football enthusiasts across the region. This development is also a fine example of the important role sports can play in creating an ASEAN Community. I believe that while the idea of ASEAN hosting the FIFA World Cup may seem far-fetched, it would nonetheless be a worthwhile endeavor for ASEAN. I can foresee that this attempt will bring a lot of opportunities to ASEAN, not only in terms of improved infrastructure and enhanced trade and services, but also opportunities for greater interaction between the region’s public and private corporation.

14. It is said that one of ASEAN's strength lies within its rich cultural heritage. While this is true, being different while living close to one another calls for the people of ASEAN to acknowledge and accept each other's diverse cultural heritage and identity. It will be in ASEAN's interest to project itself as a community of tolerance when it comes to heritage, culture, religion, ethnicity, and other practices of life. The people of ASEAN will have to reconcile their differences with one another to be in line with its motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". As a country where a people of different race and religion lives in harmony together, I believe that Malaysia has something to offer in helping to forge unity within ASEAN. Our experience in sustaining a lasting inter-cultural and inter-faith harmony all these year can be shared with our ASEAN neighbors as a part of our contribution towards this cause.

15. At the people-to-people, much still need to be done to promote greater region-wide people-to-people interconnectivity. In this connection, the potentially significant role mass tourism could play in enhancing goodwill and understanding, foster confidence and build trust across ASEAN's diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic divide should not be underrated. Efforts to strengthen and further widen the current scope of region-wide cooperative measures in this sector should be given priority by all Member States if the vision of a people-oriented fully integrated ASEAN Community is to be achieved in the near future.

16. I understand that following my speech, there will be a panel discussion entitled "The Changing Regional and Global Scenario: Challenges and Prospects for ASEAN". Considering the rather turbulent global scenario of today, the topic is timely and very relevant indeed. Given the evolving landscapes in this region, which brings along with it challenges and opportunities, it is pertinent for us as a region to find ways and means to address those challenges while making the most out of the opportunities that these scenarios entail. ASEAN's response to these challenges will be a major factor in determining its progress towards becoming a more developed, progressive and integrated region in the years leading to 2015 and beyond. I do hope that you will have a very lively discussion that would yield practical and implementable ideas that could be pursued further in strengthening our regional integration.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

17. Coming back to my topic today, I must once again stress that the realization of an ASEAN Community would not be possible without cooperation from all sectors of the community. I would therefore urge Malaysians to join hands with the Government to work towards making this vision a reality. As we are moving towards achieving the ASEAN Community in 2015, a meaningful year for Malaysia during which it is slated to assume ASEAN Chairmanship in that very year, there is an urgent need for all of us to divert all our energy and resources towards ensuring that the people of ASEAN are able to fully appreciate the diversity of the region that we are living in, and to forge closer ties amongst each other.

18. On that note, I will now end my speech. Once again, I thank the organizers for inviting me to this event and wish you success with the rest of your programme today.

Thank you