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Abdullah conferred honorary doctorate

Chok Suat Ling; Koh Lay Chin

SHAH ALAM, Thurs. - The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad was today conferred an honorary doctorate in journalism by Universiti Teknologi Mara for contributing to journalism locally and internationally.

The doctorate was presented to Abdullah by Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, who is also UiTM Chancellor, at the university's 57th convocation ceremony.

In his acceptance speech at the university's Dewan Sri Budiman, Abdullah touched on the importance of English and the status of journalism in the country and abroad.

His speech, in Bahasa Malaysia, was peppered with humorous comments that provoked hearty laughter from the audience.

Abdullah urged undergraduates to master English as it would enhance their job marketability. "English is the language of communication. English and information technology can be likened to rhythm and song, one is not complete without the other.

"Those who cannot communicate well will be left behind in their quest to obtain information in this era of knowledge. Malaysians, like other citizens of the world, cannot afford to be left behind."

The truth sometimes hurts, Abdullah said, pointing out that the majority of Malays and Bumiputera were behind the others except in administration and politics.

"It's true that we have achieved more than what our forefathers ever dreamed of, but we are still far away from our desired destination."

Ireland, Abdullah said, used to be a poor country but now its economic growth was one of the fastest among developed nations. "One of the reasons is because its people place importance on English. This, however, is not at the expense of Gaelic, their mother tongue."

Similarly, Umno founder Datuk Sir Onn Jaafar, former Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad were no less Malay even though they spoke and wrote English well.

He urged the Malays to master four languages - Bahasa Malaysia, English, Arabic and Mandarin or one of the European languages such as Spanish.

According to Abdullah, mastering a language and acquiring knowledge was pointless if one could not communicate effectively.

On journalism, Abdullah said absolute freedom of the Press did not exist anywhere.

"Those who believe it does are naive or deliberately ignorant. The media are influential and the pen is mightier than the sword. This is why we must be responsible. The media can calm people and agitate.

"The Malaysian media enjoy freedom ... they are free to write and disseminate."

However, he said those against the Government claimed the mainstream media were not independent.

"I admit that we cannot publish false news, and untrue and irresponsible allegations. If we do this, we would have departed from the ethics of journalism and can be sued for libel."

He said the non-mainstream media, however, did not have much funds and as such people were not keen to sue them.

"This is why they can write anything they want. Besides, their readers do not comprise decision makers.

"My freedom has never been curtailed by anyone. It is just that the editors are careful. Discretion is the better part of valour. This is to ensure peace and harmony, and to safeguard the sensitivities of the various races, cultures and religions."

Abdullah pointed out that freedom of the Press in America and Britain was just a concept and myth that had drugged even some of those who viewed themselves as intelligent.

"Governments anywhere can reward media companies that please it, punish those that don't. Can something like the China Syndrome happen in the US? Of course it can. This is not my statement but one made by (Paul) Krugman, a renowned New York Times journalist.

"Many media companies, whether in Western or Eastern countries, prefer to be rewarded than punished."

Abdullah said the Malay and Chinese Press were the future of Malaysian media.

"The English media, however, will continue to be influential even though its circulation is smaller than that of the Malay and Chinese media. This is because it is read by the political elite, businessmen, corporate figures, professionals, academicians, diplomats, and the intelligentsia."

An honorary doctorate in business management was conferred on DRB-Hicom chairman Tan Sri Saleh Sulong at the convocation today.

Saleh said there had been concern over the quality of graduates produced by local universities. "It has been said that they do not fulfil the requirements of the industries. This is not due to their technical expertise but has to do with their personalities, ability to communicate and attitude.

"I am pleased UiTM has taken the initiative to be an adaptive institution by identifying ways to produce capable graduates."