

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
OPENING OF THE THIRD CONFERENCE ON
THE "MODERNIZATION OF ASIA" AT DEWAN
SRI PINANG, PULAU PINANG ON 3RD
SEPTEMBER, 1972

Prof. Tan Sri Hamzah, Vice Chancellor of University of Science,
Y.A.B. Dr Lim Chong Eu¹, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and
Gentlemen.

It is both an honour and pleasure for us to have this Assembly of Asia's distinguished academics here in Penang. To us, the choice of island-city is symbolic since it is the site of our University of Science and the fact that science is synonymous with modernization.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you all distinguished delegates and I sincerely hope that you will have a pleasant stay in our country and this island-city of ours.

I am delighted to be associated with this conference on the "Modernization of Asia" which is the third in a continuing series of conferences dealing with a similar basic theme.

As Professor Hamzah said just now, the first conference was held in Seoul in 1966 where philosophers, historians, political scientists, economists and sociologists met to discuss subjects ranging from profound philosophical issues to concrete practical problems. Because modernization is inherently a complex set of inter-related processes of change, it is understandable that there was no consensus on the problems of modernization in Asia but there was a widespread consensus on the basic importance of the main theme.

The second conference in Honolulu in 1970 expanded the scope to include modernization problems of the Pacific Ocean area as well as Asia, giving a new emphasis of approach from the retrospective perspective to a futuristic perspective.

¹ Y.A.B. Ketua Menteri Pulau Pinang.

Distinguished Delegates,

I am told by your President that this conference is to focus specifically on Asia in the year 2001 which is about a generation from now. It is indeed a pleasant thought that many of us here might still be around to usher in the new millenium perhaps no longer as active participants but at least as interested bystanders.

I would like to congratulate the National Organising Committee for having chosen a time span that is close enough to allow for meaningful development programmes. Within the context of our development planning in Malaysia, this would mean the beginning of the ninth Malaysia Plan. It means a future that we can make to happen today.

We are aware that the future cannot be known; it will be different from what exists now and from what we now expect. Although "the future is not ours to see" as the popular song goes, I think we can still anticipate the future effects of events which have already happened and which in some instances we have planned and are responsible for bringing them about. Precisely because the future of some thirty years from today is going to be different and cannot be predicted, it is possible to make the unexpected to come by so long as we have the resolve, foresight and vision to make this happen.

I do not think that to plan and mould the future is an irrational activity. Governments all over the world do it everyday; planners absorb themselves in it and I myself am no less involved for, in devising practical and constructive strategies for the welfare of my people, we have accepted to work systematically on what should be done today for a better tomorrow.

(I believe therefore that making the future happen today is much more rational than coasting along on a comfortable assumption that nothing is going to change. Things will change if we are determined to make them change.)

Distinguished Delegates,

In my view, there are two complementary approaches on how to make the future happen today. The first approach is to anticipate a future that has already happened by taking advantage of the time lag between a major social, economic or cultural event and its full

impact. A sharp drop today in the birthrate through family planning practices, for example, will have its impact tomorrow. The change has happened, albeit small to begin with, and only a catastrophe could prevent its impact on social and economic planning tomorrow. Although we cannot really know how fast the impact will take place but we can say with a high degree of assurance that it will occur.

We are aware too that major cultural changes also operate over a fairly long period. This is particularly true of the subtlest but most pervasive cultural change brought about by urbanization. While it is by no means certain that every city will provide the desired changes but the fact remains that urban environment will accentuate the possibility of and need for better efficiency. Another field that always should be searched for a future that has already happened is that of knowledge, since new knowledge is likely to have impact not only on the form and content of education but also on teaching and learning materials, on teaching equipment and its design and even on research organization and research management. A wider range of opportunities exist in the future for those who first perceive the power of that new knowledge.

The second approach to what should be done today to have a modern tomorrow is to impose upon an unborn future a new ideal which tries to give direction and shape to what is to come. This, one might call, is making the future happen. It means making a different society and the embodiment in that society of an idea of a different economy and different technology. It need not be a big idea but it must be one that differs from the norm of today.

To mould the future demands also a willingness to look beyond ideas, doing something today to bring about the kind of future we want to make happen. It demands courage; it demands work and it also demands faith. Since tomorrow always arrives, we have no alternative but to accept the responsibility for making the future happen today.

On this point, I believe every Asian nation today is committed to the objective of creating a new society that will endure the challenges not only of the next three decades but going further into the next millenium. Only the approach and the underlying philosophy must essentially differ.

We in Malaysia, having formulated our nation's guiding principles—the Rukunegara—are deeply involved in this change process inspired by the ideal of a united Malaysian society in which a nation of diverse races, religions and cultures would endure and flourish. Only three days ago, we celebrated the fifteen anniversary of our Independence and once again we Malaysians dedicate ourselves to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared and to building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology.

Ours is a modest beginning towards modernization. In economic terms, the immediate objective is to bring about a change in a reasonably short period from the traditional society and its inherent characteristics of agrarian, subsistence economy to a modern industrial community.

We hope to accomplish this by urging our people to adopt new value systems while at the same time preserve and develop the finer aspects of our culture because a modern industrial society without culture will, to put it bluntly, be an ugly society. It will be a society that in the end will destroy itself.

It is an interesting point to note that of the two nations which underwent economic miracle in the postwar years, namely Germany and Japan, it is the latter which, to all indications, will be "the country of the future". The revolutionary change toward a new "Information Society", the introduction of "Levitains" capable of clipping at 250-300 miles per hour and bright robots for manless factories, are some of the things which we Asian nations may hope to benefit from Japan's success story.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As this Conference is about tomorrow, I would like to suggest that distinguished delegates present here this evening will make some realistic statements about the desired course and direction of Asian development towards the year 2001, assess the situation within which the developers must operate and indicate strategies for implementing the goals. I trust practical recommendations would emerge that will serve as guidelines to the government and planners of the countries of Asia.

I have great pleasure, therefore, to declare open the Third International Conference of the Modernization of Asia.