

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE  
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSO-  
CIATION CONFERENCE AT PARLIAMENT  
HOUSE, KUALA LUMPUR ON 13TH SEPTEMBER,  
1971

Duli Yang Maha Mulia Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Dipertuan Agung dan Duli Yang Maha Mulia Raja Permaisuri Agung.

Ampun Tuanku beribu-ribu ampun. Patik bersama-sama dengan dif-dif yang hadir di sini menjunjung kasih yang amat sangat terhadap ke bawah duli Tuanku berdua kerana telah sudi mencemar duli berangkat hadir di upacara pada pagi ini. Patik mohon izin untuk berucap kepada dif-dif yang hadir.

Mr Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like, first of all, to associate myself with the gracious sentiments of His Majesty the Yang Dipertuan Agung in extending a warm welcome to all distinguished delegates who have come from various parts of the Commonwealth to attend this Conference today.

We in Malaysia regard it as a great honour that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association should have asked us for the second time to be hosts to such a distinguished gathering of Statesmen and Parliamentarians of the Commonwealth.

How nice it is for me not only to speak to you to-day but also, as I speak, to see so many old friends whom I recognise from past acquaintance and also to see the faces of new ones.

Looking back over my years in political life, there has been one most redeeming feature. I have had to associate with more and more women as more and more of them became Members of Parliament, Ministers and even Prime Ministers.

Luckily, however, for me, my wife has so far only managed to minister the home. This trend in the increase of the fair sex in politics and parliamentary life has had a softening effect and has

brought about charm and grace to politics for a change. Also, this may be a good augury for the future that Members of Parliament from our various countries may not only get together for a few weeks conference but may decide to confer together in the life-long bond of matrimony. If this were to happen, it may be a most effective way of bringing about understanding among nations and ensure peace in the world, particularly if Ministers or even Prime Ministers decide to join together in marriage. In our country we have a husband and wife sitting together in the cabinet and this has a sobering effect on our discussion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you will know, the transformation of an Empire into a Commonwealth of free nations is one of the wonders of modern history—a process which ensures that after the political ties have been severed, the military and economic ties weakened, there still remains the important ties of goodwill and friendship.

Thus, the Commonwealth today represents a network of personal and institutional relationships which defy any simple description. Those of you visiting Malaysia for the first time will have encountered a familiar environment—where the pillar boxes are red, where traffic drives on the right, and where English is freely spoken. There are links between our universities and common qualifications for our various professions.

In other words, we have been the recipients of a most intricate and successful case of multiple transplant. The Judicial and Parliamentary systems, together with the administrative machinery, provided the first sinews of early nationhood. We were imbued with the principles of Democracy and inherited not only the institutions but the instincts of the British system of Democracy. Therefore, for those of us who were educated in the British tradition, the possibility of forsaking such deeply rooted and deeply cherished ideals as the Rule of Law and Equality of man before the Law seemed unthinkable.

Nevertheless, we cannot fail to note that this Parliamentary system of Democracy has not succeeded in many of the new nations that have gone through the process of transformation from colonial territories into independent nations.

It must be clear to us that the Westminster model of Democracy does not transplant automatically. It needs suitable environmental conditions; otherwise, the receiving tissue will reject the transplant.

We cannot, therefore, follow the British system of Democracy blindly without comparative economic and social foundations. It is, therefore, precisely in the developing countries, with their incubus of poverty and instability, that Parliamentary institutions find uncertain place in the midst of rapid social and economic changes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our search for national identity inevitably leads to political experiment; mutations develop in the constitutional structure simply in order to make it work better. Subtle forms of trespass at first begin to erode the Parliamentary process until, in some extreme cases, the very concept of Democracy is abandoned and decried.

The result is that many people, whilst sharing the ideals of British Parliamentary Democracy, are sceptical of its chances of survival under conditions different from those found in Western Europe. It is also clear from experiences in some countries that Democracy will not grow and flourish by merely adopting initially a Democratic constitution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Therefore, this morning, I propose to talk to you on our experience of Democracy in this country and our Malaysian concept of Democracy. I hope I can do this with frankness, as must be the practice in the Commonwealth Assembly such as this.

From May 14, 1969 to 20th February, 1971, this country was under Emergency Rule. Parliament was suspended and the supreme executive and legislative powers were vested in the Director of Operations who exercised these powers on the advice of the National Operations Council.

We came under criticism from some quarters, from those who feared that this state of affairs would remain a permanent feature of the Government of this country. Generalising from experience in some other parts of the world, they saw this as a prelude to a military regime with Director of Operations cast in the role of a Dictator.

However, as soon as we were satisfied that the security situation had improved sufficiently, we voluntarily divested ourselves of the Emergency powers and reconvened Parliament in February this year. This fact, in itself, is clear evidence of our faith in the concept of Parliamentary Democracy and our determination to uphold and practise it.

Now, today, Parliament is once again supreme in this country—that the nation has accepted certain restrictions on the democratic process is a sincere and practical attempt to make it workable and acceptable to a new set of political and social facts.

Naturally, there may be misgivings among some who see Democracy only in terms of a rigid conformity with the Westminster model. We, however, hold the view that while we acknowledge and respect the Mother of Parliaments, such a Mother may produce diverse offsprings—each one the individual product of environment as well as of inheritance.

The Malaysian type of Democracy is the one we feel best suited to the needs of our unique multi-racial society. It has had to be adapted to realities of economic and social conditions. It is not always possible for a developing country to achieve the standard of Democratic practice equal to that of a country which has had experience for centuries.

In 1957, we in Malaysia (then Malaya) set out trying to do this very thing. However, we were following a system rooted in a relatively homogenous community that had also reached a degree of social cohesion to which we ourselves were not quite ready to aspire to. We were probably guilty of over-idealising the Westminster model. Today, we have sought to apply a corrective balance suitable to our circumstances and acceptable to our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In our country, the principles of Democracy are as fixed and abiding as ever and we have never departed from our fundamental democratic values.

It is true that we have made adjustments in our Constitutional framework; and, for a short time, we were compelled by circumstances to sacrifice some freedom in order that freedom could ultimately be protected and preserved.

The view we take is that Democratic Government is the best and most acceptable form of Government. We recognise that each nation must develop, according to its own light, its own chosen political and economic systems and that the developing world has a special need of an articulated political system suited to its own problems.

The major concerns of Malaysia, Ladies and Gentlemen, are communalism and militant communism. These are problems which, by their very nature, impose constraints on any completely liberal concept of Democracy. The attempt to evolve a reasonable and workable system for ourselves, however, is not a bid to abandon Democracy at any fundamental level, but an earnest and sincere attempt to make it work here in our country and to make it answer the imperatives of racial and social integration towards greater progress and stability.

For those who doubt this, comparison may be made with those nations who have discarded the Parliamentary system. For Democracy to work, it must produce results. It must demonstrate that the one-man-one-vote system can produce an honest and effective Government, working through an honest and effective administration, in the interests of its people. If the people lose faith in this system, then they will look for other alternatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us consider our case—the case of Malaysia. At the very outset of our Independence, our loyalty to Democratic values was severely tested in the crucible of the Emergency created by Communist terrorism. Our doubtful critics should remember that the Communist menace which we experienced was not only proving ground of Democracy in Malaysia, but was in fact the ground on which the seeds of Democracy were grown.

We are essentially a Government elected by the people, for the service of the people. We have held elections four times and practised Parliamentary Democracy for fourteen years. We hold free elections, and the machinery of Government between elections operates to serve the public, through processes intelligible and visible to the public and subject to public criticism. Rule is by consent.

We support and practise the Party system and believe in a loyal Opposition whose role is to keep Government under critical surveillance and provide an alternative Government, if necessary. Every five years, Ladies and Gentlemen, we hold our breath as we seek a fresh mandate from the people.

Independence brought the unique opportunity of nation building to occupy the thoughts and energies of our people. This involved the high responsibility of devising a written Constitution. We sought to enshrine the guiding principles of Democracy along with our aim of achieving a meaningful and purposeful philosophy to meet the special circumstances of our environment.

We are a country of many races, and, therefore, many different cultures. Full protection of individual rights is guaranteed under the Constitution. Special provisions also exist to guard against any form of discrimination for reasons of race, religion or colour. There is a provision safeguarding the special position of the Malays and other natives as well as the legitimate interests of other communities.

The struggle for political justice has yielded to a new struggle for social justice. Skill and technique had to be applied to the delicate handling of a racially mixed community.

Our problems here are almost unique. In no other country is the balance of major communities so delicate. In no other country, are political and economic powers divided so sharply along communal lines. The Constitution was, therefore, an attempt to lay secure foundations to preserve peace and harmony among our people of various races.

Some two years ago in May 1969, our Constitution was molested by forces destructive to the Rule of Law. The very foundation of this Rule of Law and the safety and security of our people compelled us to invoke Emergency Rule. However, the aim of the Emergency Government was solely to restore law and order and prepare the nation for the return to the Parliamentary processes which, as you know, were clearly vindicated in February this year.

However, the social, economic and political problems which brought about our crisis cannot be erased overnight. So, therefore, sincere and persistent efforts must be continually made by all our

people in a genuine attempt to foster harmony, goodwill and complete unity which are vital for the foundation of the peace, stability and integrity of our country.

Certain vital priorities and issues emerged from this tragic passage in our history that could no longer be swept under the carpet. We had to think afresh, in order to construct a political framework on an unshakable and firm foundation consistent with the realities of our multi-racial society and our economic conditions. We could not use the Westminster yardstick of 1957 in Malaysia in 1971, as to do so would have been to miss a valuable lesson in history.

We, therefore, had to give our people a new sense of direction and re-set the compass of our ship of State. We formulated the Rukunegara, which in English meant National Ideology and, at the same time, amended our Constitution.

The Rukunegara proclaims the basic principles underlying our Constitution, and includes a declaration of our belief in the Democratic way of life. It was intended as a synthesis of thoughts and feelings that have evolved in our common history as a nation.

The amendments to the Constitution are, in fact, a pre-condition for the Malaysian concept of Democracy.

Our Constitution, Ladies and Gentlemen, was originally drawn up in wise and judicious recognition of the multi-racial nature of our society and the counter-vailing interests of our different communities. The delicate balance we reached, as long as it had the agreement of all concerned, was the main foundation of our collective existence.

When this balance was upset, the trouble began and these provisions became "sensitive issues". These issues came under persistent attack for purposes of political gains in the elections. They became the subject of heated controversy and, therefore, the focus of historical prejudices, emotionalisms, and abused for individual selfish and anti-national interests! What had been intended as safeguards became a threat to our survival.

We found ourselves in the unique and explosive situation in which the freedom of speech upheld by Democracy was being exploited to such a degree that our national security was challenged by the democratic process itself.

This situation, which I describe as unique, is such as the West has seldom found itself in the parallel position, where liberal Democracy can be made the instrument by unscrupulous and ruthless elements to undermine the very foundation of the nation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The aim of the Constitutional Amendments, therefore, was to remove the sensitive issues from the realm of public debate and to ensure the smooth functioning of Parliamentary Democracy. Certain provisions were entrenched to assure our people that their rights and privileges under the Constitution could not be threatened. As an enforcement and deterrent measure, the Sedition Act was passed. A National Unity Council was set up, composed of people from all parties and all walks of life, to assist in formulating long-term and permanent solutions to our racial problems.

The Amendments to the Constitution were fully debated in Parliament and approved by an overwhelming majority of both Houses. They were, therefore, not imposed by direct rule, but made Law by the duly elected representatives of our people.

Nevertheless, these Amendments have been questioned by others as curbs on a truly Democratic system. But, as far as I am aware, no State which had a Democratic Constitution, translates the right to freedom of speech into an absolute right. In America, freedom of expression enjoys no absolute immunity from constitutional limitations, but must be measured by standards that satisfy the First Amendment.

The Malaysian concept of Democracy subscribes also to the need to balance individual interest against the general security of the State. Our concept may not necessarily be suitable for other peoples but it meets with the national temperament and accords with the realities of contemporary society in Malaysia.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I reiterate that our Malaysian formula does not depart from the true spirit of Democracy. We have, in fact, re-dedicated ourselves to such basic principles as loyalty to King and Country, the upholding of the Constitution and of the Rule of Law.

We are a society pledged to the concept of equality. Under the representative system, as opposed to Custodian-type Colonial rule, the moral and legal authority underlying Government derives from the interests and welfare of our citizens.

My Government, the Government of Malaysia, is actively regulating and rectifying the inequalities in our society in the interests of economic Democracy. If I may quote from Aristotle—"The State comes into being that men might live; it continues that men might live well".

Economic Democracy tries to ensure a fair share for all and in any prosperity this country achieves, a place in our country for all our citizens. But, in order to achieve this, we have to take positive measures in earnest to eradicate poverty as a democratic aim in order to establish a just and stable society.

We would do well to remember, Ladies and Gentlemen, that in the West, social systems tend to be more supportive of Democracy. Here, under the threat of hostile counter-influences, there is a correspondingly greater need for commitment to the democratic ideal.

It can be contended that in Malaysia we continue to defend the cause of Democracy is fervently as we did through twelve years of the Emergency, by posing a workable alternative to the Communist ideology. To this end, we have devised an institutional framework that assures each community in this country that its right and freedom are entrenched and cannot be abrogated by the other.

This is the Malaysian concept of Democracy and with the help of almighty God, we will strive to uphold this concept, nourish and nurture it for all time.