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Najib's fitting tribute to bloc founders

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'FIRST-CLASS': Conscious of his late father's role, PM speaks from the heart



**A JALIL
HAMID**

ON Aug 8, 1967, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand gathered in the main hall of the Thai Foreign Affairs Department in Bangkok to sign a piece of document.

That was how Asean (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) was born, and the document that they signed would be known as the Asean Declaration.

The five foreign ministers were Adam Malik of Indonesia; Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines; Tun Abdul Razak Hussein of Malaysia; S. Rajaratnam of Singapore; and Thanat Khoman of Thailand.

They were subsequently hailed as the founding fathers of Asean, one of the world's most successful groupings of nations sitting in a region once beset by instability and conflict.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak paid tribute to the founding fathers and other past Asean leaders for their foresight and commitment to turning the group-

ing into what it is today.

But, what was more touching was that his opening speech at the 27th Asean Summit in a packed hall was not just inspiring; he was speaking from his heart, conscious of the role played by his late father in helping to form Asean.

"This was one of his best speeches ever. His delivery was first-class. He rose to the occasion," said a retired senior civil servant, who started his career during Tun Razak's tenure as prime minister. "Najib is now taking Asean to a higher level."

In his 25-minute address to some 3,000 people at the Plenary Hall of the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, also beamed nationwide, Najib was not just being nostalgic, but he also offered a pragmatic approach in shaping Asean for the next 10 years or so.

It is also a momentous moment for Najib as the current chair of Asean. The 10-member grouping will, today, formally declare the establishment of the Asean Community on Dec 31 this year, marking the culmination of a decades-long effort to integrate and forge ahead together.

Najib spoke yesterday about the need to speed up the formation of a single Asean market and production base; for the easier movement of goods, services, skilled labour, capital and investments across Asean members; and the elimination of ex-



cessive non-tariff barriers in Asean countries.

Investors and businessmen still complain about the myriad rules and regulations in the region that add to their trading and business costs.

One chief executive officer of a large Malaysian bank with operations around Asean privately admitted that existing rules barred his bank from having a single backroom processing for the region.

And, in spite of the 10 countries having signed an agreement on the movement of professionals, the actual movement is still subject to the policies of individual nations.

People's Asean, as the Malaysian chairmanship would like to portray, goes beyond having a TV show or special lanes at airports or Asean food promotions.

It is about making real change in the lives of ordinary folk and businesses in this fast-developing region of 633 million people.

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