

**OPENING ADDRESS BY YAB PRIME MINISTER : THE 19TH
CONGRESS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN LIBRARIANS (CONSAL XIX)**

By : DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM
Venue : DEWAN MERDEKA, LEVEL 4, WORLD TRADE CENTRE,
KUALA LUMPUR
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OPENING ADDRESS

THE HONOURABLE

YAB DATO' SERI ANWAR BIN IBRAHIM

PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA

**IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE 19TH CONGRESS OF
SOUTHEAST ASIAN LIBRARIANS (CONSAL XIX)**

17TH JUNE 2025 (TUESDAY) | 10.00 AM

DEWAN MERDEKA, LEVEL 4

WORLD TRADE CENTRE, KUALA LUMPUR

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh dan salam sejahtera.

Yang Berhormat Datuk Aaron Ago anak Dagang,

Menteri Perpaduan;

Yang Berhormat Senator Puan Saraswathy Kandasami,

Timbalan Menteri Perpaduan;

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Dato' Sri Shamsul Azri bin Abu Bakar,

Ketua setiausaha Negara;

Yang Berbahagia Datuk Haji Ruji Bin Haji Ubi,

Ketua Setiausaha Kementerian Perpaduan;

yang kebetulan akan menyempurnakan tugas terakhir hari ini sebagai pegawai Kerajaan dan saya percaya orang yang muda masih lagi ada tugas-tugas besar yang lain. Jadi setiap terima kasih bagi pihak Kerajaan atas sumbangan;

dan rakan-rakan yang saya muliakan.

1. Sidang ini, walaupun tidak mungkin dilihat sebagai suatu tunggak dalam pembangunan negara atau ekonomi, itu tidak sebenarnya mewakili pandangan yang tepat. Kalau kita bicara soal negara MADANI, pertumbuhan negara memperkasa ekonomi dan negara, ia mesti berasas kepada tunggak ilmu. Tunggak ilmu itu, selain dari sekolah, universiti, ialah perpustakaan. Dalam sejarah tamadun yang besar itu dikaitkan dengan gedung ilmu yang besar, sama ada di Alexandria atau Baitul Hikmah di Baghdad, atau kemudiannya di Barat.
2. Tokoh-tokoh besar dunia, pemikir, filasuf, pujangga, semuanya berpengkalan di perpustakaan. Justeru itu, perhimpunan ini tentunya punyai tugas yang besar, terutama peringatan kepada pustakawan bahawa ada sesuatu peranan utama — bukan sekadar menghimpunkan gedung buku dan memperindahkan dengan almari kaca, tetapi untuk menjadikannya sebagai suatu medan dan wahana

yang penting bagi memupuk kesedaran, menggalakkan minat membaca.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

3. Clearly this Congress brings together some of the region's most vital custodians of knowledge, culture, and community. This lay the foundation for something often spoken of but rarely defined: a true Southeast Asian community. The love for scholarship and learning. I made reference to earlier about great civilizations; known, of course, for their economic strength, technological prowess, military power but underlying these factors is, of course, knowledge. The capacity to not only combine these forces together into this great library, but to be able to disseminate the information effectively.
4. Now, to my mind, this is a major task of librarians in this region. Those who are familiar with novels — I remember or recall in the novel *The Name of the Rose*, that is Italian novelists. I can't recall the name, that is the problem without having a text. But *The Name of the Rose* and the second novel was Foucault's *Pendulum*. Now, in *The Name of the Rose*, this was the labyrinth of a huge building in the library, the search for great work, the book. To show the strength of knowledge and great contributions to mankind through books.
5. Now, having said that, and the great libraries of the past — from Alexandria to Baitul Hikmah to the West now, what is our challenge? The challenge is to get this reading culture back. Now, we have lost it.

I made reference a week earlier, I think, to this book written by Allan Bloom ‘The Closing of the American Mind’, I think in the early 80s — where Allan Bloom made this reference to the decline of the culture, tradition, and capacity, interest to read. In social media, they read two sentences and they come to a conclusion. Influencers will continue to say in a few words and come to a judgment.

6. Now, the culture of creativity, of trying to fathom the truth, to understand, to appreciate through — that reading culture is somewhat lost. And this was written somewhat in the 80s. And I believe this something has gotten worse.
7. Now, astrophysicist Carl Sagan, for example, once said when he was reflecting the wonder of books. Now this you see, the disconnect between what Carl Sagan said and the reality: “What an astonishing thing a book is. Astonishing the book when you have the love for scholarship, you see a book is astonishing. One glance at it and you’re inside the mind of another person — maybe somebody dead for thousands of years ago. Writing therefore binds together people of different ages, cultures, citizens of distant epoch. A book, therefore, is a proof that humans are capable of working magic.” Not the exact words — I’m paraphrasing Carl Sagan.
8. When you read for example, Greek philosophy, you are reading work of thousands of years. You read the Roman Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations, or then Shakespeare, or Sejarah Melayu, or Babad Tanah Jawi, you are talking about the wisdom of the past. Then you are confronted with artificial intelligence. But the challenge for

librarians is therefore, how can you help to become an effective purveyor of that magic, to be able to translate, to guide the books of course, in the library, to guide it to those who come to the library and open this horizon, so that those who come actually love it.

9. I was fortunate when I was at the University of Malaya, there was this great library at Beda Lim who had this passion and almost an obsession of wanting to make this library a great library and get students to read. Then when I was already in government as a minister, I used to introduce books in most of my speeches. Then this very upstanding librarian, Rohani Rustam, at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. The library is not huge, but this librarian had that interest. The moment she reads about what I've said, say for example, I mentioned Allan Bloom just now or some new works, either literature or technology or economics. The next day, those days they have fax. She will faxed the reviews in international journals, so that I can assess and evaluate and reflect what I have read and what are the critical views. But these are rare. I mean people with that passion.

10. I'm not suggesting that all librarians in Malaysia should start sending me reviews and I have nothing to do and just start reading reviews. But what I'm saying is there are librarians with that passion and I've seen librarians when I make sure that my house's library is the most important place. I have collected books for the last 40-50 years, some rare books, some great works and you can see the librarians sometimes are difficult. They are very prickly. "No, you shouldn't be like that". "This is something like that." You have to tolerate them because that's their passion. I understand you guys very well, but it is a passion.

11. Now our challenge therefore, is how do you get your students? Say our National Library students coming in, sometimes we distribute books for free. And last year, I announced that every student in this country is given RM100 ringgit just to buy books. This year I said all teachers will be given RM100 to buy books and university students. Now okay, they buy. Beautify the house with libraries. PMX kata harus ada buku, jadi dia ada buku. Itu buku bukan untuk pameran.

12. When I was a Minister of Education a long time ago and I usually go for surprise checks. Say, I have a program in Alor Setar or Universiti di utara, so I will stop by in some of the schools on the way to Jitra and go check for some, firstly the lavatory, then library, because it sounds about the same lavatory, library. Now, there was one school in Kedah where I went to the library, very clean, very proper, everything's sealed in the plastic. So, I said to the teacher, "hey, come on, what do you keep them?" "We have to keep clean sir." I said no, the book is not supposed to be dirty, but it's supposed to be read. So, I had to come back to the Director General of Education to give instructions. This book should not be covered in plastics. Open the plastic and make sure people read. And we should know for example, because from the record, you know whether it's being read or not.

13. Now, it is digression, YB Aron you don't mind? You know, I've been a teacher all my life. So, I think even as a Prime Minister, I behave like a teacher and someone getting bored. So please bear with me. Librarians therefore, when you give a book, there's a book festival recently and I said it's not necessary just to give a book. You should say "open page 43, please read that para" and make it so exciting that they will continue to read page 44. And that's the challenge. Because

without that, the consequences are profound. You know, for journalism, for students, for public knowledge, for democracy itself. Look at that rancorous debate, contentious at times, full of mischief and hatred with hardly any understanding. Just playing to the gallery and this is of course not wise, but at least populism, but you breed and encourage ignorance. So that is why libraries and librarians have this big challenge.

14. I listen to YB Aron about democratizing access through digital mobile libraries, what have you. Yes, these are infrastructure and of course libraries have to adapt with a steady resolve. Digital, AI, but our duties of course to encourage how do we then get people and students, particularly the young to have the interest to read. Of course, we were all young before. I was young a long time ago, and we love music, we love popular culture. Fine. Or cinemas, we know all the name of actors and actresses and we can sing English, Chinese, Hindi songs, Bollywood movies, Hollywood. Okay, fair. But then, inculcating that habit, that interests to me is a collective exercise. Because without that, there is no space to test ideas, no opportunity to compare experiences, to strengthen one another in order to navigate the shifting sands of our time.
15. Imagine ASEAN, this great regional initiative. We have had Alhamdulillah a very successful meeting because of ASEAN leaders' very pragmatic attitude to work together to bring up our economy together and to talk about collaboration in terms of energy transition, digitalization, and of course the culture and the arts.

16. Can you imagine for example, getting the great heritage of Angkor Wat to Borobudur to the Malacca Sultanate as an example and getting students to be alert that here we are with this enormous past great civilizations. Instead, our students feel and have greater confidence and not become subject of captive mind to imagine only with or being calmed by Western civilization and ideas through libraries, through reading.
17. Those who are familiar with Uppsala University, for example, they still hold books seized during the 17th-century wars Jesuit texts taken from Catholic libraries and returned as trophies of conquest.
18. I'll give you another example, recently about during the Baghdad civilization, the emperor, the Caliph invited someone from Central Asia, Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, the -stans, the area Central Asia and invited this Alim to become Wazir, the minister or Prime Minister. He didn't ask for new cars, or new office, or new wife you see, like Aaron would have asked that (in a joking tone) but he said "No, I need a few camels to bring my books to Baghdad."
19. You can see the priority that man with that tradition of knowledge and culture. And books also are very political. Their books banned, their books considered to be subversive, but decisions can only be made not through opportunism, opportunistic designs but through knowledge and understanding.

20. So, the good news is and for librarians even in ASEAN with all the possibilities we have endured and experienced. Libraries have endured, and so have librarians but you have a major task not only to disseminate that experience, that knowledge found in books, but to get libraries to be a vibrant centre.
21. To our librarians here in those days I think, if I'm not mistaken, I inaugurated this conference in 1996. You can guess my age, at that time I think I was 10 years old in 1996. And I think consistently I mentioned that there are big tasks to make sure that students love to go to the library, not because it is air-conditioned. Okay fine, they want some comfort; I used to do that when I was a student in Universiti Malaya. They'd say "Where did you go? It'd be hot outside." fair but then, once you get there, you must get librarians to charm the students. You know, just introduce books and encourage them to read and, you know, normally have a discussion in the library.
22. I do normally tolerate when students choose libraries, particularly in the main library where people have to keep quiet and read, to have discussions. So, now we have sample programs where we have study rooms where you can have a discussion within the library compound.
23. So, we have great history, paper scrolls, microfilms, now digital and I thank you very much for this initiative to have a digital library for ASEAN and as long as we're doing it using money from the Minister of Finance. So, I must again take this opportunity to thank and express my appreciation to the organizers and to the participants and please be reminded that this is an important conference.

24. Libraries are not built as monuments for pride. It is where knowledge is to be retrieved and consumed. You know the environment is near monastic silence, can you imagine?. But the model now has to adapt with the new substances.

25. This is what the people particularly the young and the students need. To have a library to read in near monastic silence. At the same time, they want spaces open, alive, connected, related to the culture and the arts. Places not only for books, podcasts, films, databases, e-books, and a variety of media that reflect how people learn and explore today.

26. So, thank you very much for this opportunity and for listening to my morning lecture.

Wassalamualaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh.

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