

SPEECH BY
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AT THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY SPEECH AND PRIZE GIVING DAY OF KOLEJ
TUANKU JA'AFAR, AT DEWAN TUANKU NAJIHAH, KOLEJ TUANKU JA'AFAR,
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It gives me great pleasure to be here today to witness the presentation of prizes to the best and brightest of Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar. It is my belief that many of these young people will go on to further excel in academia and will, in the near future, return to serve their country and their organizations well.

2. The importance of education can never be over- emphasised because the learning process never ends. It is through education that Malaysia has built up a strong core-group of professionals and a well-educated population that has contributed significantly to our growth. With rising standards of living and a greater awareness of the value of education, we will continue to be on track to reach greater heights.

3. Nevertheless, we have to constantly remind ourselves not to get derailed and veer off towards less productive endeavors that may disrupt efforts to keep our country competitive and our people with a higher standard of living.

4. In their speeches earlier, both YAM Tunku Naquiyuddin and Mr Patrick Briggs, spoke of the perspective of history. I cannot agree more that a perspective of our history will give us the insights and foresight we need to work towards improving the lot of our people. Perspective of history will give us a better understanding of who we are, what we are, where we came from and where we should go from here.

5. Today is a milestone for many of you who are graduating and will go on to pursue your studies and hone skills which will see you through the rest of your life. For those who are receiving their prizes, I hope you will use this moment of recognition as an encouragement to achieve higher standards. How you mould yourself at this young stage will determine how solid your foundation will be for the future.

6. In the earliest mentions of our land in the history books, Ptolemy described the Malay peninsula as the Golden Chersonese. This refers to us as a land of plenty. We have been blessed and we should country our blessings. It was our strategic position and our resources that saw the rise of the Malacca Sultanate. But our wealth also attracted foreign marauders who attacked and conquered our people and ruled us as a colony for more than 450 years.

7. It is not easy for a shackled people to shake off the fetters and rebound into the future. It is not easy to build a nation from scratch.

8. When we became independent 43 years ago, all we had going for us was the pride of an independent people. We had no real industry to speak off nor did we have many professionals that a nation needs to build itself up. We were an independent country, yes. We could proudly shout Merdeka, yes. But how were we going to give our people a meaningful and real independence?

9. The biggest task before our founding fathers was to strengthen unity amongst the country's three main races which were still suspicious of each other. On our doorsteps, we had a hostile neighbour flexing its muscles; communist insurgency threatened peace and stability; and our only university was in Singapore.

10. We were then essentially a nation of farmers, fishermen and small businessmen. We had many people telling us what to do. There were those who meant well and had our interests at heart. There were those who wanted us to be transformed into their model of what an ideal nation should be. There were those who wanted to use us as pawns in the bigger war of ideologies.

11. But ultimately, our founding fathers followed the path that they felt was best for their people and for their country. They knew that for us to survive as a nation, we had to eliminate the suspicions and espouse multi-racialism in every facet of our life. They promoted unity in every facet of Malaysian life and at the same time, strived to provide all the benefits of education and health care to ensure that our human capital was enhanced.

12. We went through difficult times. After the quelling of Konfrontasi and the split with Singapore, we faced the bloody May 13 riots. There were many who had written us off as a nation then but it is a tribute to the Malaysian spirit that we not only overcame these dark periods in our history, but that we rose from the ashes to become what we are today.

13. We must never lose sight of our history. We must never forget that we were a subjugated people for 450 years because we do not want to be a conquered race again. We must never forget the trials and tribulations of growing up. We must never forget the lessons our history has taught us. And we must never stop learning from the histories of others.

14. The older people you see around you here were all students like you once. I remember the pride our parents felt when we were lining up to receive our prizes. I remember the pride we felt when we queued up to receive our scrolls. During those times, all of us felt that we could conquer the world.

15. But we were also conscious of the needs of our country. We wanted to get out there and make the difference; make our nation strong and united so that we could compete with the best. It was because we lacked so many things as a nation that we felt the need and urge to strive for development.

16. I have often come across friends who remark on a hardworking colleague or businessman, saying "he is hungry. He will go far." Essentially, it boils down to that. The newly born Malaysia had poor infrastructure; it lacked proper health facilities in both rural and urban areas; utilities like water and electricity were deficient; there were not many schools and hardly any university; people were generally poor and jobs were not easy to come by.

17. We were a population hungry for development; hungry for improving our lot; hungry for success. We studied hard, some under the light of oil lamps; we worked hard; we scrimped and saved.

18. The Malaysia we see today is the result of that hunger we had. It is a result of the foresight of our founding fathers who wanted our independent nation to be

independent in every way. It is a result of careful planning, of harmony and of the far-sightedness of our leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

19. But today, with the success we have achieved, the hunger has been appeased. Many of those who did not go through the old days have forgotten or choose not to care that we were once a backward and subjugated people. The majority of our population has grown up knowing only the prosperity of nationhood.

20. Many of the young today do not want to hear of us talking or reminiscing of the past because what matters to them is what today has to offer. Discipline is lacking in schools; in universities, the hunger to achieve academic excellence is slackening; undergraduates discard their books for placards; they abandon the sports fields and march down streets instead; they want to shape the destiny of their people when they have not yet shaped their own destinies.

21. The last thing I want to do is preach. But I would be remiss in my duties to my country and to my people if I do not say what I have said today. The future is yours for the taking. This country is not ours for the keeping. We are mere caretakers, looking after it as best as we can, before you take on that role for your future generations.

22. But to be able to bring this country forward, the young have to equip themselves and there is no substitute for education; nor is there any better teacher than experience.

23. We are still the Golden Chersonese. We are rich in natural resources. Better still, we are even richer today with human capital and the Government has provided the means for us to enhance that richness through the various universities, colleges and facilities it has developed and set up.

24. But as happened in 1511, if we are not strong enough to face up to the competition, we run the risk of becoming a dominated and subjugated people again.

25. This is not an imagined threat. It is real. The world around us is honing its skills. Globalisation and the fast development of information technology is making competition more keen and intense. We can see from neighbouring countries how turmoil, instability and poor planning has rendered nations rich in resources becoming a battlefield where neighbours kill neighbours and children starve and have no prospects for a future.

26. Let us not be satisfied with what we have got. We have to bring that hunger back into us because the process of learning and improving never stops. If we have done well, let us strive to do better. Let us strive to be the best and ensure that our country and our people are never dominated again.

27. The young are our hope for the future and in you we will one day entrust this country for the sake of our future generations. It is my sincere hope that you will shoulder this responsibility and your first step, as you walk the hallowed halls of academia, is to equip yourself.

28. Malaysia is in the process of formulating a knowledge economy masterplan which is also slated for release this year. This blueprint is to propel Malaysia into the new

economy by leveraging on the intensive use of knowledge, skills, linkages, ideas and technology. I believe the success of such a transformation will hinge on our ability to develop and strengthen what has become the most important factor of production human capital, especially in terms of knowledge.

29. We are now faced with the task of populating our country with skilled, innovative and creative workers who will be the catalyst in moving the entire Malaysian economy up the value-added chain through the utilization of the physical infrastructure available. At the heart of the plan was the need to develop human capital through a first-class education system. The government's target of reducing the number of low- knowledge workers depends on the emergence of a talented pool of young knowledge workers who will lead the sectoral shift from manufacturing to information and communication technology, and other high-tech industries.

30. Such domestic capacity building is increasingly pertinent in the globalised marketplace. Malaysian graduates will have to compete with the best of the best in a fiercely competitive job market. The failure to produce graduates who are able to succeed in such an environment will be to the grave detriment of the entire country. I believe this link between education and work is increasingly important in Malaysia. If we are to succeed in creating a knowledge based economy in which the best ideas can flourish, we must generate a environment of innovation by allowing students to explore their talents fully.

31. Many developed countries have a proactive tradition of encouraging students in colleges and universities to take up work placements and internships to provide key work experience which can give them practical relevance with reference to their degree. The job itself will teach students self-confidence and, most importantly, they will be able to understand the application of their knowledge.

32. Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar, as a full boarding school, offers not just an academic discipline, but also an overall development of the individual. Involvement in sports, clubs, societies and community service projects are an indispensable part of this development. Fostering of shared values, loyalty, commitment and emotional attachment to the nation can easily start from your boarding community.

33. Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar, from a humble beginning of 135 students, has now expanded to 500 students and its owners have invested millions of ringgit in the last ten years to provide quality education.

34. To take full advantage of the opportunities offered by an increasingly borderless world, the best foreign universities are being encouraged to set up offshore branches in Malaysia. At the same time corporations have been given the mandate to establish private universities. This dynamic relationship between the government, the private sector and strategic foreign academic partners will no doubt help us achieve our goals.

35. By building a world-class system that is flexible and innovative we hope to create here in Malaysia a regional education hub and a centre for educational excellence.

36. The continued development of private institutions of higher learning must take into account the need to make private education accessible to students who have hitherto not seen it as a viable option. Although many of our private colleges have been established by private sector concerns, the modus operandi in this sector must

be the provision of high quality and accessible education and not profit. I would also like to urge more private sector companies to formulate scholarship schemes to local universities and colleges, thus further linking education with the development of human resources for relevant industries.

37. On that note, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar on its tenth anniversary and wish you the best for the future.

Thank you.