

**SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE MERDEKA AWARD
AT KUALA LUMPUR CONVENTION CENTRE (KLCC), KUALA LUMPUR
27 AUGUST 2007**

BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM

ASSALAMUALAIKUM WARAHMATULLAHI WABARAKATUH AND GOOD EVENING

MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE MERDEKA AWARD

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

1. THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME TO SAY A FEW WORDS AT THE LAUNCH OF THE MERDEKA AWARD. I AM INDEED HONOURED TO BE AMONGST SUCH DISTINGUISHED COMPANY.

2. A WORD OF THANKS IS IN ORDER TO THE MEMBERS OF THE MALAYSIAN OIL AND GAS FRATERNITY FOR ORGANISING THESE AWARDS. THE FRATERNITY HAS LONG BEEN COMMITTED TO THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATION. THIS VERY SPECIAL AWARD REAFFIRMS THAT LONGSTANDING COMMITMENT.

3. 50 YEARS AGO, IN HIS SPEECH PROCLAIMING THE INDEPENDENCE OF MALAYA, OUR FIRST PRIME MINISTER TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN SAID:

QUOTE

"...WHILE WE THINK OF THE PAST, WE LOOK FORWARD IN FAITH AND HOPE TO THE FUTURE; FROM HENCEFORTH WE ARE MASTERS OF OUR DESTINY, AND THE WELFARE OF THIS BELOVED LAND IS OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY. LET NO ONE THINK WE HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE ROAD: INDEPENDENCE IS INDEED A MILESTONE, BUT IT IS ONLY THE THRESHOLD TO HIGH ENDEAVOUR – THE CREATION OF A NEW AND SOVEREIGN STATE."

UNQUOTE

4. I AM GLAD TO REPORT THAT 50 YEARS ONWARDS, THE HIGH ENDEAVOUR THAT WE HAVE EMBARKED UPON HAS BORNE FRUIT. WE REMAIN THE MASTERS OF OUR OWN DESTINY. AND WE HAVE INDEED PROMOTED AND ENHANCED THE WELFARE OF THE MALAYSIAN PEOPLE.

5. WE ARE NOW STANDING UPON THIS WATERSHED MOMENT IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY. MANY OF THOSE PRESENT TODAY CAN ATTEST TO THE DIFFICULT CHALLENGES THAT WE HAVE HAD TO FACE. THAT WE ARE STILL HERE TODAY, A UNITED AND PROSPEROUS NATION, IS IN ITSELF A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT.

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6. WE BEGAN OUR COLLECTIVE HISTORY AS MALAYA. WE WERE A FRAGILE NATION, AND A COUNTRY IN TURMOIL. I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN MOST OF US LIVED IN KAMPUNGS AND RURAL AREAS. WE BATHED IN THE RIVER, AND DREW WATER FROM WELLS. MANY OF US WALKED LONG DISTANCES TO OUR SCHOOLS. WE WERE RELATIVELY HAPPY, BUT WE WERE ALSO VERY POOR.

7. IN JUST FIVE DECADES, THIS PICTURE HAS BEEN RADICALLY TRANSFORMED. MOST FAMILIES NOW OWN CARS AND MOTORCYCLES. WE TAKE ELECTRICITY AND CLEAN PIPED WATER FOR GRANTED. OF COURSE, NOT ALL OF US ARE RICH. BUT CERTAINLY MOST OF US CAN NO LONGER CALL OURSELVES POOR.

8. OUR ACHIEVEMENT BECOMES EVEN MORE IMPRESSIVE WHEN WE CONSIDER THE STATISTICS. POVERTY LEVELS HAVE BEEN REDUCED FROM OVER 50 PERCENT IN 1957, TO LESS THAN 6 PERCENT NOW. OUR PER CAPITA INCOME HAS INCREASED ALMOST TWENTY-FIVE FOLD. WE STARTED FROM A PALTRY 815 RINGGIT IN 1957 (IN 2006 RINGGIT TERMS). BY THE YEAR 2006, OUR PER CAPITA INCOME HAS REACHED 20,841 RINGGIT. BY ALL MEANS, THIS HAS BEEN A REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT.

9. TODAY, THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME CLASSIFIES MALAYSIA AS A HIGH INCOME, HIGH HUMAN DEVELOPMENT COUNTRY. THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM RANKS MALAYSIA 20TH AMONG 125 ECONOMIES IN TERMS OF BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS. WHILE THERE IS MUCH LEFT TO BE DONE, WE HAVE CLEARLY ACHIEVED A GREAT MANY THINGS TO BE PROUD OF.

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10. CELEBRATING THE HISTORIC 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF OUR INDEPENDENCE SHOULD NOT JUST BE ABOUT REMINISCING OF THE PAST. IT SHOULD ALSO BE A TIME TO REFLECT ON THE CHALLENGES AHEAD.

11. OF COURSE, WE ARE NOT A PERFECT COUNTRY. LIKE ANY NATION, WE ARE SUBJECT TO STRESSES AND STRAINS. THIS IS DUE TO EXTERNAL FORCES, AS WELL AS INTERNAL TENSIONS. WITHIN THE TIME I HAVE TODAY, ALLOW ME TO SHARE MY THOUGHTS ON SOME OF THE KEY CHALLENGES THAT WE NOW FACE AS A NATION.

12. FIRSTLY, MALAYSIA NEEDS TO TACKLE THE ISSUE OF ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION. WE STARTED OUT AS A RURAL, AGRARIAN COUNTRY. WE WERE HIGHLY DEPENDENT ON GLOBAL EXPORTS OF TIN AND RUBBER. TODAY, WE ARE A MODERN, INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRY.

13. BUT THE NEXT PHASE OF OUR EVOLUTION AS A DEVELOPING ECONOMY WILL BE THE MOST DIFFICULT. WE MUST TRANSFORM MALAYSIA INTO A DEVELOPED NATION. WE NEED TO SHIFT INTO HIGHER VALUE-ADDED ACTIVITIES. WE NEED TO BRING MALAYSIA INTO THE NEW KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY.

14. AND WE NEED TO DO THIS IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT THAT HAS BECOME EVEN MORE COMPETITIVE. CHINA AND INDIA ARE GROWING RAPIDLY. OUR NEIGHBOURS FROM ACROSS THE ASEAN REGION ARE ALSO CATCHING UP VERY QUICKLY. THERE IS NO ROOM FOR COMPLACENCY.

15. SECONDLY, WE NEED TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BALANCE. AGAIN, I BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE DONE WELL ON MANY COUNTS. WE HAVE ALL BUT ERADICATED POVERTY. THE GOVERNMENT IS WELL ON ITS WAY TOWARDS ELIMINATING HARDCORE POVERTY BY THE YEAR 2010.

16. WE HAVE ALSO DONE MUCH TO REDUCE THE DISPARITY BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS. AT THE SAME TIME, WE HAVE ALSO TAKEN GREAT PAINS TO ADDRESS THE GAP BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS. AFTER 50 YEARS, IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT WE HAVE SUCCEEDED IN CREATING AN EQUITABLE AND JUST MALAYSIA.

17. AND YET THERE IS MUCH THAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE. WHILE THE INCOME GAP BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS HAS BEEN NARROWED, WE ARE STILL FAR FROM OUR TARGET OF ACHIEVING INCOME PARITY. THE GAP BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL INCOMES ALSO CONTINUES TO BE A WORK IN PROGRESS.

18. THIRDLY, WE NEED TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL UNITY. EVEN IN THIS AREA, I BELIEVE WE HAVE ACHIEVED MANY THINGS. WE ALL SPEAK BAHASA MALAYSIA. WE ALL EAT THE SAME FOOD AND SUPPORT THE MALAYSIAN TEAM IN SPORTS. AND MOST OF US HAVE FRIENDS FROM ACROSS THE RACIAL SPECTRUM IN MALAYSIA.

19. 50 YEARS AGO, CONTACT BETWEEN THE RACES WAS LARGELY LIMITED ONLY TO THE ELITE CLASSES. TODAY, MALAYSIANS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE CAN COUNT ON FRIENDS FROM DIFFERENT RACES AND BELIEFS. IN AN APRIL 2007 SURVEY DONE AMONG MORE THAN 1,000 MALAYSIANS, 81 PERCENT SAID THAT THINGS WERE FAVOURABLE WITH RESPECT TO ETHNIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT RACES.

20. AT THE SAME TIME, THERE IS STILL MUCH WORK TO BE DONE. THERE IS PERSISTENT PERCEPTION THAT WE HAVE NOT DONE ENOUGH TO PROMOTE NATIONAL UNITY. THERE ARE STILL MANY DISCORDANT VOICES IN OUR COUNTRY, FANNING THE FLAMES OF CHAUVINISM AND MISTRUST. THEY AIM TO PROVOKE CONFRONTATION. THEY SEEK TO DENY THE VIRTUES OF COMPROMISE AND TOLERANCE. WE MUST NEVER ALLOW THEM TO GAIN GROUND. WE MUST NEVER GIVE THEM THE ROOM TO WRECK OUR MOST PRECIOUS IDENTITY AND NATIONAL UNITY.

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21. THERE ARE MANY NAYSAYERS AND DETRACTORS, BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE MALAYSIA. THEY SEEK TO PAINT A DARK AND BLEAK PICTURE OF MALAYSIA. A MALAYSIA THAT IS SUPPOSEDLY INEFFICIENT AND LACKING IN INTEGRITY. A MALAYSIA THAT IS SUPPOSEDLY TORN AT THE SEAMS. A MALAYSIA THAT IS INCREASINGLY DISUNITED AND IN DECLINE.

22. BUT I REMEMBER MANY YEARS AGO, SIMILAR BLEAK IMAGES WERE ALSO BEING PAINTED OF MALAYSIA. A MALAYSIA THAT WAS SUPPOSEDLY A NEO-COLONIALIST CONSTRUCT. A MALAYSIA THAT WOULD FALL INTO THE CLUTCHES OF COMMUNISM LIKE A FALLING PIECE OF DOMINO. A MALAYSIA THAT WOULD FALL TO ITS KNEES IN THE AFTERMATH OF DEVASTATING ECONOMIC CRISES.

23. BUT WE HAVE PROVEN THEM WRONG. TIME AND AGAIN, WHEN OTHERS PREDICTED MALAYSIA'S DOOM, WE HAVE PREVAILED. WE PREVAILED, BECAUSE OUR FOUNDING FATHERS HELD STRONGLY TO THOSE VALUES THAT MAKE US UNIQUELY MALAYSIAN. VALUES SUCH AS OUR DECENCY; OUR COMPASSION; OUR TOLERANCE FOR OTHERS; OUR INTEGRITY; AND OUR PASSION AND DEDICATION TO THE NATION.

24. THIS IS THE TRUE LEGACY OF THE TUNKU. THIS WAS ALSO THE LEGACY OF TUN RAZAK, AND THE LEGACY OF TUN HUSSEIN ONN. THE LATE TUN DR. ISMAIL; THE LATE RAJA TUN MOHAR BADIOZAMAN; THE LATE TAN SRI AZIZAN ZAINUL ABIDIN; THE LATE TAN SRI NOORDIN SOPIEE – THIS IS THEIR LEGACY, TOO. THESE ARE THE VALUES THAT WE SHOULD BE PASSING DOWN TO OUR CHILDREN.

25. THE MERDEKA AWARD SYMBOLISES THESE VERY SAME IDEALS. IT REWARDS THOSE INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS FOR THEIR EXCELLENCE AND LASTING CONTRIBUTION. THESE ARE THE MALAYSIANS WHO BEST REPRESENT THE SPIRIT OF OUR FOUNDING FATHERS, WHOSE COMMITMENT AND SACRIFICE CULMINATED IN THE INDEPENDENCE OF OUR NATION.

26. I HOPE THAT THIS AWARD AND ITS RECIPIENTS WOULD BECOME A SOURCE OF PRIDE FOR THE NATION. IF THESE AWARDS CAN INSPIRE ORDINARY MALAYSIANS TO REACH FOR GREATER HEIGHTS, TO STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE IN THEIR OWN LIVES, THEN THESE AWARDS WOULD HAVE MADE A PROFOUND DIFFERENCE.

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27. THROUGHOUT THE COURSE OF OUR HISTORY, MALAYSIA HAS PERSEVERED, OFTEN AGAINST VERY DIFFICULT ODDS. FROM OUR HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, WE HAVE GROWN FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, TO BECOME A FLOURISHING AND PROSPEROUS COUNTRY.

28. WE STILL HAVE A LONG JOURNEY AHEAD OF US. I AM CONVINCED THAT IN 50 YEARS TIME, CENTENNIAL MALAYSIA WOULD HAVE NOTCHED MANY MORE ASTOUNDING ACHIEVEMENTS – BECOMING A DEVELOPED NATION; HAVING OUR VERY OWN NOBEL LAUREATE; PERHAPS EVEN WINNING THE WORLD CUP!.

29. BUT THAT IS A JOURNEY THAT WILL NOT BE OURS TO TAKE. IT WILL BE UP TO OUR CHILDREN, OUR GRAND-CHILDREN, AND OUR GREAT-GRAND-CHILDREN, TO TAKE MALAYSIA TO THE NEXT LEVEL. BUT I AM CONFIDENT THAT THE CENTENNIAL GENERATION WILL CONTINUE TO BE GUIDED BY THE TIMELESS VALUES OF OUR FOUNDING FATHERS. FOR THESE ARE THE SAME VALUES THAT INSPIRED THE MERDEKA GENERATION ON THE ROAD TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE.

30. ON THAT NOTE, WITH THE RECITATION OF BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM, I HEREBY OFFICIALLY LAUNCH THE MERDEKA AWARD.

THANK YOU.