

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY  
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI  
AT THE 14TH MALAYSIAN LAW CONFERENCE 2007  
AT RENAISSANCE HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR  
29 OCTOBER 2007**

-----

BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM

ASSALAMUALAIKUM WARAHMATULLAHI WABARAKATUH AND GOOD AFTERNOON

MS AMBIGA SRENEVASAN  
PRESIDENT, MALAYSIAN BAR

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

1. ALHAMDULILLAH, ALL PRAISE AND GLORY ARE FOR ALLAH S.W.T., FOR IT IS WITH HIS BLESSINGS AND GUIDANCE THAT WE ARE GATHERED HERE TODAY. I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE ORGANISERS FOR INVITING ME TO ADDRESS THIS GATHERING. BEFORE I BEGIN, ALLOW ME TO EXTEND MY SINCERE APOLOGIES FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO BE HERE EARLIER, AS SCHEDULED. NEVERTHELESS, I AM INDEED HAPPY TO BE WITH YOU TODAY TO SHARE MY THOUGHTS AND ADDRESS CERTAIN CONTEMPORARY ISSUES THAT CONCERN US ALL.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

2. THE LEGAL FRATERNITY HAS BEEN, AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE, AN INTEGRAL PART OF MALAYSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY. INDEED, THE BAR AND THE BENCH HAVE PLAYED A FUNDAMENTAL ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR COUNTRY.

3. OUR FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PRIME MINISTERS ALL HAD LEGAL BACKGROUNDS, WHILE OUR FOURTH PRIME MINISTER HAD AN EXACTING MEDICAL BACKGROUND. THEY WERE PRINCIPLED, DISTINGUISHED, COURAGEOUS AND FAR-SIGHTED MEN. EACH HAD, IN THEIR TIME, DEVELOPED THE NECESSARY FRAMEWORKS AND INSTITUTIONS WHICH PAVED THE WAY FOR MALAYSIANS TO DRIVE ROBUST DEVELOPMENT FORWARD AND, IN TURN, BENEFIT FROM A MUCH IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE. I BELIEVE THAT THE RIGOUR OF THEIR BACKGROUNDS INFLUENCED THEIR STYLE OF LEADERSHIP AND THEIR APPROACH TO GOVERNMENT, HELPING THEM MAKE STRONG DECISIONS WHICH HAVE STOOD THE COUNTRY IN GOOD STEAD.

4. ABOVE AND BEYOND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, IT IS HEARTENING TO NOTE THAT THE WIDER LEGAL FRATERNITY HAS CONTINUED TO PLAY A ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY. IN THIS, THE BAR COUNCIL HAS PLAYED A SUSTAINED ROLE, TAKING POSITIONS AND ADVOCATING MEASURES ON VARIOUS ISSUES OF PUBLIC INTEREST. WHAT IS NOTEWORTHY IS THAT THESE POSITIONS ARE, QUITE OFTEN, SEEMINGLY DIVERGENT FROM THAT OF THE GOVERNMENT. IN OTHER WORDS, WE OFTEN PERCEIVE OURSELVES TO BE ON DIFFERENT SIDES ON ANY NUMBER OF ISSUES.

5. LET ME MAKE CLEAR THAT MY GOVERNMENT IS NOT AVERSE TO CRITICISM. AS I HAVE OFTEN SAID, WE RECOGNISE THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ENABLING AND ENSURING THE SUCCESS OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS WE HAVE LAID DOWN FOR THE COUNTRY. IT IS THE COLLECTIVE EFFORTS OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS – INCLUDING THE PUBLIC SERVICE, PRIVATE SECTOR, CIVIL SOCIETY, PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA – THAT WILL DETERMINE THE EXTENT OF OUR ACHIEVEMENTS IN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SOCIAL PROGRESS.

6. IT IS BECAUSE OF THE RECOGNITION MY GOVERNMENT HAS FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS THAT WE NOW SEE MORE ISSUES BEING OPENLY DISCUSSED IN THE MASS MEDIA. I DISAGREE WITH THE STAND SOME HAVE TAKEN THAT MY GOVERNMENT IS SUPPRESSING PUBLIC OPINION. ANY MALAYSIAN WHO WATCHES THE NEWS OR READS THE PAPERS IS VERY AWARE OF THE STATE OF THE NATION, FROM ITS ACHIEVEMENTS, TO THE ISSUES FACING IT. OF LATE, THIS HAS FOCUSED ON A NUMBER OF VERY PUBLIC REPORTS THAT HAVE QUESTIONED THE EFFICIENCY OF GOVERNMENT, SUCH AS WASTAGE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE AS REPORTED BY THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT. THESE AND OTHER ISSUES, INCLUDING THAT OF A VIDEO CLIP WHERE A LAWYER IS ALLEGEDLY AND INAPPROPRIATELY DISCUSSING JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS, ARE PURSUED BY JOURNALISTS AND BLOGGERS WITH MUCH INTENSITY AND IN MUCH DEPTH.

7. RELATEDLY, IN PARLIAMENT, AND DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE BARISAN NASIONAL CONTROLS MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF THE SEATS IN THE HOUSE, WE OFTEN HEAR VIBRANT DEBATES. MINISTERS ARE KEPT ON THEIR TOES AS PARLIAMENTARY CRITICISM IS NOT MERELY FROM MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION, BUT ALSO EQUALLY FROM B.N. BACKBENCHERS. IN SITTINGS OF THE AUGUST HOUSE AND IN MEETINGS OF THE VARIOUS PARLIAMENTARY SELECT COMMITTEES RECENTLY FORMED, THE VOICES OF B.N.'S BACKBENCHERS ARE OFTEN LOUD AND HARD-HITTING.

8. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE LIMITS TO WHAT CAN BE PUBLICLY SAID OR DEBATED. REALITY REQUIRES A RESPONSIBLE AND DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT TO SET A LIMIT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH. I DARE SAY THAT NO GOVERNMENT IN THE WORLD SUBSCRIBES TO THE IDEA OF ABSOLUTE FREEDOM. THERE IS TOO MUCH AT STAKE, MORE SO IN A YOUNG, MULTI-RACIAL, MULTI-RELIGIOUS COUNTRY LIKE OURS. WHEN MY GOVERNMENT DISCOURAGES OR CURBS DISCUSSIONS ON CERTAIN ISSUES, IT IS NOT IN A WAY MOTIVATED BY THE DESIRE TO DEPRIVE MALAYSIANS OF THEIR FUNDAMENTAL LIBERTIES OR TO GAIN POLITICAL ADVANTAGE.

9. RATHER, IT IS MOTIVATED BY A PROFOUND SENSE OF OUR DEEP RESPONSIBILITY AS STEWARDS OF THE MANY GROUPS OF THIS LAND, AND AS GUARDIANS OF THE LEGACY OF PEACE AND STABILITY ACHIEVED ON THE BACK OF MUCH SACRIFICE. FIFTY YEARS OF CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS, OF HARD WORK AND DEDICATION, HAVE PUT US IN A STRONG POSITION TO EXECUTE THE NATIONAL MISSION AND ACHIEVE OUR GOAL OF DEVELOPED NATION STATUS BY 2020. IN THE RACE FOR GREATER DEVELOPMENT, WE HAVE ALSO SUCCEEDED IN UNIFYING A SEGREGATED NATION. WHILE WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE TO ADDRESS ISSUES HINDERING GREATER INTEGRATION, WE MUST NEVER TAKE THE PEACE AND HARMONY WE HAVE FOR GRANTED. WE MUST CHERISH AND SUSTAIN IT AND INDEED DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO ENSURE THAT EVERY MALAYSIAN CONTINUES TO BENEFIT FROM IT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

10. THE OBSTACLES THAT NOW FACE US AS A COUNTRY ARE MORE DIVERSE THAN EVER BEFORE, AND EACH OF THEM, MORE COMPLEX. IN SURMOUNTING THESE, MY GOVERNMENT STRIVES FOR BALANCE, AND TO EQUITABLY ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF THE DIFFERENT GROUPS IN MALAYSIA. OUR SITUATION OFTEN REQUIRES UNDERSTANDING THAT CANNOT BE SEEN, ANALYSED OR JUDGED FROM JUST ONE PERSPECTIVE. WE ALWAYS WEIGH THE IMPACT OF ALL DECISIONS REACHED IN TERMS OF HOW PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED, BOTH AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS GROUPS, AND CONSEQUENTLY, OF HOW THE COUNTRY'S WELL-BEING, AS A WHOLE, IS AFFECTED.

11. IN SAYING THIS, IT IS MY HOPE THAT ALL DEMANDS, CRITICISMS, OPINIONS OR EVEN ACCUSATIONS ARE MADE WITH CAREFUL AND PERHAPS MORE COMPREHENSIVE CONSIDERATIONS. THERE IS A NEED TO SINCERELY UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT THE UNIQUE SITUATION WE ARE IN. IN THE CONTEXT OF TODAY'S GATHERING, THE PURSUIT OF CONVENTIONAL LEGAL IDEALS MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CURRENT REALITIES. PUT ANOTHER WAY, IN ANY GIVEN GEO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, LEGAL FRAMEWORKS MUST BE A PRODUCT OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITIES THAT THEY HAVE TO OPERATE WITHIN.

12. AS AN INFLUENTIAL NATIONAL BODY, THE MALAYSIAN BAR WILL FIND ITSELF BEARING A SIMILAR BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY AS THE GOVERNMENT, FOR ALL THE ACTIONS AND DECISIONS IT TAKES. THEREFORE, WHEN THE BAR MAKES A STAND, THAT STAND MUST BE IN THE BEST INTERESTS, NOT ONLY OF ANY INTERNAL PRESSURE GROUPS OR EVEN CERTAIN OF ITS MEMBERS, BUT OF THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE. FOR INSTANCE, WHEN THE BAR COUNCIL OFFICIALLY SUPPORTS DISSENTING JUDGMENTS OR PUSHES FORWARD ITS VIEW THAT MALAYSIA IS A SECULAR STATE, THE BAR MUST TAKE CARE TO NOT SIMPLY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF CERTAIN SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY. ANY MISCALCULATIONS IN THIS REGARD COULD DRIVE DEEPER WEDGES BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT GROUPS IN THE COUNTRY. THIS OPENS THE BAR COUNCIL TO ACCUSATIONS OF CAUSING GREATER DAMAGE, NOT ONLY TO THE BAR COUNCIL AS A PROFESSIONAL BODY, BUT ALSO TO THE COUNTRY.

13. AS A BODY WHOSE OPINION IS WIDELY RESPECTED NOT JUST LOCALLY, BUT INTERNATIONALLY AS WELL, THE BAR COUNCIL MUST RECOGNISE THE REPERCUSSIONS OF ITS ACTIONS. WITH REGARD TO THE RECENT PUTRAJAYA MARCH, I WOULD FIRST TAKE THE VIEW THAT A PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION IS NOT LIKE ANY OTHER PUBLIC SOCIAL EVENT. A DEMONSTRATION GIVES THE IMPRESSION THAT A PROBLEM HAS REACHED AN INTRACTABLE IMPASSE, EVEN WHEN, IN REALITY, IT HAS NOT.

14. ABOVE AND BEYOND THIS, IT ALSO SENDS NEGATIVE VIBES TO DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN INVESTORS, UNDERMINING THE TIRELESS EFFORTS OF INDUSTRY AND GOVERNMENT IN ATTRACTING INVESTMENTS AND SUBSEQUENTLY, IN CREATING EMPLOYMENT AND PROVIDING NEW ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES. THE FUTURE OF THIS COUNTRY DEPENDS ON, AMONG OTHERS, THE POLITICAL STABILITY AND SOCIETAL PEACE WHICH HAVE BEEN PRESERVED FOR SO MANY YEARS. THE CREATION OF NEGATIVE PERCEPTION, THROUGH OVER-REACHING AND UNFOUNDED PUBLIC ACCUSATIONS, IS DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME. EVEN ON ITS OWN, THESE DAMAGING PERCEPTIONS CAN POTENTIALLY BE ALL THAT IT WILL TAKE FOR US TO FALL BEHIND OTHER COUNTRIES IN THIS INCREASINGLY COMPETITIVE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

15. MY GOVERNMENT TAKES THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE BAR COUNCIL SERIOUSLY. JUST LIKE THE BAR, WE BELIEVE IN THE INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY. SIMILARLY, UPHOLDING THE SUPREMACY OF THE CONSTITUTION IS ANOTHER COMMON GOAL. IMPROVING JUDICIAL SERVICES, ERADICATING CORRUPTION AND ENHANCING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR ARE ALSO AMONG THE THINGS THAT ARE THIS GOVERNMENT'S NATIONAL PRIORITIES. AS THE PRIME MINISTER ELECTED BY THE PEOPLE, I TRY, TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITY, TO DISCHARGE MY DUTY WITH HUMILITY AND WITH CONSTANT REALISATION THAT THE FUTURE OF THIS COUNTRY MUST NEVER BE JEOPARDISED.

16. WE MUST ALWAYS TAKE THE VIEW THAT DISAGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCES CAN BE SOLVED IN MANY WAYS. A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE WAY IS WORKING TOGETHER SINCERELY AND WITHOUT PRE-CONDITIONS, AS WELL AS WITHOUT BEING SUSPICIOUS OF EACH OTHER. I AGAIN CLEARLY STATE THAT MY GOVERNMENT IS NOT ONLY WILLING, BUT IS ALSO SERIOUS IN ADDRESSING THE VIEWS OF THE LEGAL FRATERNITY, OF WHICH THE BAR COUNCIL IS PART. AT THE SAME TIME, WE ASK THAT THE SAME SINCERITY AND RESPECT BE EXTENDED TO THE GOVERNMENT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

17. I AM NOT DENYING THERE ARE IMPERFECTIONS AND CHALLENGES THAT THE COUNTRY IS FACING. NOR AM I DENYING THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT THE MALAYSIAN BAR HAS TO PLAY, TO ENSURE THAT MALAYSIA, AS A COUNTRY THAT ASPIRES TO BE IN THE SAME LEAGUE AS OTHER DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, DOES NOT IGNORE FUNDAMENTAL LIBERTIES OR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS. MALAYSIA HAS COME A LONG WAY IN THE PAST 50 YEARS SINCE INDEPENDENCE. WHILE WE STILL HAVE SOME WAY TO GO, THE LEGAL FRATERNITY SHOULD NOT BE IRRATIONALLY NEGATIVE OR UNDULY PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE PROGRESS THE COUNTRY HAS MADE. I HOPE THE BAR ALSO ACKNOWLEDGES THAT THERE ARE MANY MORE OPPORTUNITIES THAT COULD BE BETTER EXPLORED TOGETHER AND WITH A GREATER SENSE OF COMMON PURPOSE.

18. IN THIS LIGHT, THE LEGAL FRATERNITY CAN INDEED WORK CLOSELY WITH THE GOVERNMENT, NOT ONLY FOR THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COUNTRY, BUT ALSO TO FURTHER DEVELOP OUR ECONOMY . WE HAVE BRILLIANT LEGAL MINDS AND COMPETITIVE FIRMS THAT SHOULD BE SELLING THEIR SERVICES INTERNATIONALLY. IN THIS REGARD, WHILE THE GOVERNMENT IS ENGAGED IN PROMOTING NEW SOURCES OF GROWTH, FOR EXAMPLE, IN ISLAMIC FINANCIAL SERVICES, WE ENCOURAGE MORE MEMBERS OF THE LEGAL FRATERNITY TO DEVELOP SPECIALIST LEGAL EXPERTISE IN THIS VERY AREA. IN DOING SO, THEY WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES ON OFFER, AS BANKERS AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL SECTORS HAVE ALREADY DONE. NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES AND THE ENTRY OF BIG AND SOPHISTICATED GLOBAL PLAYERS IN NICHE INDUSTRIES AND PLANNED GROWTH AREAS, SUCH AS THE ISKANDAR DEVELOPMENT REGION, REQUIRE THAT OUR LEGAL FIRMS HAVE THE CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY TO MEET THE INCREASING DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS.

19. I UNDERSTAND THAT THE BAR COUNCIL, WITH MORE THAN 12,000 MEMBERS, IS GROWING AT 10 TO 15 PERCENT ANNUALLY. WITH AN INCREASING NUMBER OF MEMBERS, THE CHALLENGES CAN AND WILL ONLY INCREASE. LIBERALISATION AND GLOBALISATION ARE REALITIES NOT ONLY FOR THE MANUFACTURING AND AGRICULTURAL SECTORS, BUT ALSO FOR LEGAL SERVICES. THERE IS A NEED FOR THE MALAYSIAN BAR TO ASSIST ITS MEMBERS, ESPECIALLY THE SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZE FIRMS, TO DEVELOP BUSINESS SKILLS AND SPECIALIST LEGAL COMPETENCIES, INCLUDING INTERNATIONALLY APPLICABLE ONES, TO ENABLE THEM TO COMPETE WITH LARGER LOCAL FIRMS, WHO I UNDERSTAND ARE ALREADY FORMING ALLIANCES WITH MAJOR FOREIGN FIRMS. STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMMES NEED TO BE FORMULATED TO ENSURE THAT MALAYSIAN LAWYERS ARE BETTER ABLE TO UNDERSTAND AND TO MEET THE MORE DEMANDING AND CONSTANTLY CHANGING GLOBAL LEGAL ENVIRONMENT.

20. IN ENDING, I HOPE THAT SUSTAINABLE AND OPEN CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION ARE CREATED BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE VARIOUS SEGMENTS OF THE LEGAL FRATERNITY. I ALSO HOPE THAT THE MANY INTEREST GROUPS IN THE COUNTRY, OF WHICH THE BAR COUNCIL IS ONE, TAKE A MORE HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE CHALLENGES FACED AND ALWAYS STRIVE TO ACHIEVE SOLUTIONS WHICH ARE EQUITABLE TO ALL. OUR APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING IN THE OPERATION OF OUR INSTITUTIONS AND OF CIVIL SOCIETY, MUST NOT BE LIMITED BY CONVENTIONAL IDEALS, EVEN IF THESE MAY HAVE ARGUABLY WORKED IN FOREIGN CONTEXTS. WE MUST RATHER BE MOVED TO DO IT OUR WAY, REFLECTING THE VALUES THAT WE HOLD FIRM TO AND FIXED IN THE BELIEF THAT WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY.

21. WITH THAT, I WOULD LIKE TO ONCE AGAIN THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME HERE, AND WISH YOU FRUITFUL AND PRODUCTIVE DELIBERATIONS IN THIS 14TH MALAYSIAN LAW CONFERENCE.

THANK YOU.