

THE "A UNITED MALAYSIAN NATION BY THE YEAR 2020" DINNER
SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 31 JANUARY 1992

Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji President Harvard Club; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen,

After-dinner speeches are supposed to be light and not too taxing on the mind. Perhaps this is because after a heavy dinner and possible indigestion we should be spared of mental indigestion as well.

2. National unity is not a suitable post-prandial subject. But then it is your President who chose this subject. I have no say in the matter. If you get indigestion both gastronomically and cerebrally, you should know whom to blame.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. For the next three decades the nation's energies will be concentrated on trying to realise Vision 2020. That Vision identifies nine central challenges that would have to be successfully addressed if we are to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. The one identified as likely to be "the most fundamental, the most basic" challenge, is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation.

4. By the year 2020 we would have had about two generations of independent Malaysians. Will we be a united "Bangsa Malaysia" or "Malaysian Nation" by then? Perhaps one way of addressing this question is to identify what are some of the fundamental prerequisites for successfully forging a united nation in a setting like Malaysia, and then examining where we stand with regard to these fundamental elements.

5. The elements required for building united nations differ from country to country. Switzerland, India, the United States, Northern Ireland, Fiji, Lebanon, all require formulae suited to their environments, which are conditioned largely by their historical, political, legal, social, cultural and economic development.

6. Some nations evolve naturally through ethnicity and a common culture. Others, and this includes Malaysia, are legally constituted nations. There is no common inherited ethnicity or culture. There is no naturally common language. Even the geographical boundaries did not evolve. They are delineated by common consent through a process of negotiations. In the Peninsular the common factor is provided by the recognition of the federation of the Malay states as the basis for the nation. But by the time of independence these states had already been changed through linkages instituted by the British. Additionally the population had changed so that a common ethnic origin cannot be the basis of national unity. The presence of citizens of differing ethnic and cultural origins requires the formulation of a new basis for national unity. Fortunately for Malaysia the founding fathers were able to reach broad agreement on the basis for this unity. This socio-political contract bound together the citizens of Malaya and with minor modifications has been accepted by the peoples of Sabah and

Sarawak when Malaysia was formed.

7. The acceptance is real and sincere. We have gone through many trials and tribulations. In 1969 we were severely tested. But we came through intact. Indeed we learnt how to curb our feelings and to manage ourselves better. We see quite a few countries around the world today which fail to curb ethnic loyalties and are suffering from intractable and violent conflicts which benefit no one. Presently many countries are fragmenting into small, weak entities which will probably remain antagonistic to one another even after each gains freedom from the centre. But we have had this consensus ever since independence and the formation of Malaysia. We have enshrined it in the Federal Constitution, and later in the Rukunegara. Together they define the political character of the nation, the political and social position of the various communities, the strategic goals of the nation, and the principles or common values which Malaysians will adhere to in the pursuit of these goals.

8. This consensus was not reached without challenge; neither has it survived without strain. There were the communists, and there were and still are the extremists. For one brief period we even had to suspend parliament to save the country. In other words we had to be undemocratic in order to save our democracy. And because we acted promptly and decisively we were able to return to the original consensus which has since proven to be an admirably viable and comprehensive proposition.

9. I am confident that this basic social contract by which we have lived so successfully in the last thirty plus years will continue to serve us well in the next three decades.

10. But building a nation out of a diverse people with differing historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and geographical backgrounds is something more than just fostering consensus on the basic character of a state or nation. It involves the fostering of shared historical experiences; shared values; a feeling of common identity and shared destiny that transcends ethnic bounds without undermining ethnic identity; loyalty, commitment and an emotional attachment to the nation; and the flowering of distinctly national ethos. The emergence of all these factors in turn involves other prerequisites.

11. One of these is simply time. We cannot have a shared historical experience or develop all the other attributes unless we give ourselves time. There are countries in the world today which have existed for many decades and even centuries more than Malaysia which have yet to sort out their national unity problems. We must note too that they started out with much less complicated and variegated problems than Malaysia. Indeed, nation-building is an extended process, and all we have had is approximately thirty years in our present national configuration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

12. By the year 2020, we would have had another thirty years behind us. After

six decades, if we manage our nation-building process conscientiously and well and suffer no major setbacks, we would have traversed twice the distance we have covered so far. We would have had sixty years of shared historical experience, of fashioning shared destinies, of cultivating common values and perceptions, of bonding the people with a common language, and of evolving without duress a uniquely Malaysian culture, identity and ethos which is organic to the Malaysian environment and which distinguishes us from other nations and other peoples. If we are still not a mature nation by then, we would at least be well on the path to healthy nationhood.

13. But all this only if we manage our nation-building process well. This will entail honouring our respective obligations and responsibilities under the Constitution, whether it relates to politics, citizenship, socio-economic opportunities, language, religion or the respective powers of the centre and the state. This was the solemn pledge that we all made when we worked out our consensus. This pledge we must continue to fulfill, sincerely and fully.

14. Managing our nation-building well will also entail that we redress the socio-economic imbalances among the various ethnic groups and the various regions in the country. Grow we no doubt must. If we do not grow we will not have the resources to redress anything. But redress we must too. If we do not redress we will self-destruct, which will reduce to naught all our growth.

15. It is for this reason that Malaysia needs a policy of sustainable growth with equity in order to build a sound and resilient base for national unity. We have already come a significant way towards redressing imbalances in the last thirty years. Hopefully by the year 2020 we would have overcome the problem altogether.

16. If we are indeed able to achieve this without unduly sacrificing growth and without undermining the legitimate rights of everyone, I would say we would have overcome the greatest single obstacle to national unity in this country. This task belongs not just to the Government. The private sector has an important part to play too, especially as Government progressively privatises its operations and deregulates. The private sector should get together to consider how it can further enhance its role in this field. In fact it is in the private sector's own interests that it contributes more substantively in this field, as national unity and ethnic harmony are the prerequisites of political stability so vital for good business.

17. As for the Bumiputera, it is evident that they are successfully engaged in many modern and skilled sectors of the economy. But they too need to do more in order to participate fully in the more dynamic and lucrative sectors of the economy. As Malaysia continues to industrialise and urbanise and we progress towards a fully developed society, the urgency and importance of modifying our traditional psycho-cultural values and attitudes will grow. Only when we change will we be competitive. Only when we change will our progress and advancement be sustainable and selfreliant. We can change and adapt without discarding all that is good that we inherited; these we must keep and these we must cherish. The Bumiputeras must appreciate this. And they must change. They will not lose

their identity but their capacity will be enhanced.

Ladies and gentlemen,

18. To manage our nation-building process well we will also need peace and stability. We need peace and stability to pursue and achieve our strategic goal of becoming a united nation without hindrance. We need peace and stability to bility to grow and to prosper, to achieve socio-economic equity and justice, to foster and to nurture common values, and to reinforce consensus and strengthen the spirit of moderation, tolerance and mutual respect.

19. While we have had relative peace and stability in the last thirty years, it was marred by the communist insurgency, 'konfrantasi' and the May 13 incident. Yet we were able to make tangible progress. Our political stability and economic growth have been the envy and aspirational model for many countries around the world. Imagine what we can achieve in the next thirty years if our peace and stability were more complete. We must reject the forces of extremism and intolerance, of disorder and disruption.

Ladies and gentlemen,

20. Ethnic and religious passions are particularly easy to inflame. Once aroused, they are difficult to subdue. If we turn the pages of history they are replete with conflicts and wars conducted in the name of race and religion. If we cast around us today we will see many nations, some of them tranquil for many decades, now torn by ethnic turmoil and religious dissent. They sometimes cause untold suffering and unmitigated destruction. Even when peace is restored, they have already left indelible scars and set the nations back many years.

21. We do not want this in Malaysia. In the past we have had our share of ethnic and religious conflicts. Once, we came close to catastrophe. If we can help it, we do not want to walk through these dark passages again. Hence our limits on certain activities. Issues considered to be especially sensitive and inflammatory are removed from the arena of public debate and controversy. Even if this is perceived as infringements on human rights particularly by some foreign quarters, we apologise to nobody. We can be sure that they will not be around to carry the burden when the nation is crippled by violence, or to pick up the pieces when it implodes. The limits that we impose on our rights and liberties we do by due process of law and democracy, and we have a healthy and stable working democracy as well as a deep respect for the rule of law.

22. To foster a united nation we also introduced various policies and programmes in the last thirty years besides the New Economic Policy and the National Development Policy. They include the National Education Policy, the National Language Policy and the National Culture Policy. National unity is also an important objective in policies and programmes involving such matters as sports and housing. Together these policies and programmes contribute towards healthy social contacts among the various communities, shared values and perceptions, and the emergence of a common Malaysian identity and culture

while preserving our respective ethnic heritage.

23. I am confident that in the next thirty years we will build upon these policies and their implementation. They cannot be without imperfections. We must correct them as we go along, as we have done in the past. Where they do not produce the desired results we must review them. We must be prepared to innovate and to experiment, and to adapt to changing circumstances and requirements.

Ladies and gentlemen,

24. Besides the fostering of a united ' Bangsa Malaysia' or ' Malaysian Nationality' , we have identified eight other central challenges to be overcome by the year 2020. Our objective of a united nation must be pursued simultaneously with these other objectives. In fact the achievements of all nine objectives are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing.

25. The task before us is indeed an enormous one. To engineer social change on such a scale and over such diverse fields requires much creativity, consummate planning and careful coordination.

26. The enormity of the task however, should not deter us. In seeking to achieve our goals we must build upon our strengths. Among the strengths which we must build upon is our capacity to promote growth we are acknowledged as one of the most dynamic economies of the world our ability to accommodate and achieve consensus in the larger interest, our tolerance, our love for peace and stability, and our democratic way of life. These strengths, nurtured well, will stand us in good stead in meeting the challenges ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen,

27. Finally, it will be the rakyat themselves who will determine whether or not Malaysia becomes a united nation by the year 2020. In democracies the people exercise direct control and influence over the kind of policies and programmes adopted. An elected government can only move in the direction that the people want it to, and it can only move as fast as the people permit it to.

28. Here we are fortunate. The people of Malaysia, irrespective of their racial origins possess the values, attitudes and behaviour which have helped the country achieve the level of unity and nationhood that it has attained today. We do have our extremists, but by and large Malaysians are attached to the country, peace-loving, pragmatic, accommodating and respectful of each other's legitimate rights. They also cherish freedom, stability and social justice.

29. All these qualities we must nourish and strengthen in our home, in our schools, in the workplace and in the society as a whole in order to consolidate the foundation for a united and resilient nation in the next three decades. The primary focus here will have to be on the present generation and the next, for it is they who will manage and inherit the Malaysia of the year 2020. In their hands and with the blessings of the Almighty we entrust the destiny of this nation.

30. With these food for thoughts, I wish you all a pleasant evening.