

**HONORARY SPEECH ON “CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION  
AMONGST ASEAN FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” ON THE  
OCCASION OF THE 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY OF  
THAILAND on 16 SEPTEMBER 2013 at PLAZA ATHENEE HOTEL BANGKOK**

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1. Firstly, I would like to congratulate the Christian University of Thailand for its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and thank you for inviting me to be a guest at your celebration. I must begin by pointing out that unlike Europe there is no homogeneity between the peoples of the ASEAN countries as there is in Europe. In fact we are culturally very different from each other. We are also at different stages of development.

2. But this does not mean that there can be no cross-cultural collaboration. Earlier on our economic system differs quite a bit. But now almost all of us have adopted some kind of capitalist free-market system. The States may still get involved in businesses but all now allow private businesses. As a result collaboration is not only at Governmental level but also at the level of the people, including business people.

3. This collaboration compliments the political collaboration between the different nations. We are not yet willing to have an ASEAN parliament as the European have. But we have political and diplomatic relations and frequent meetings between our leaders.

4. In most of the ASEAN countries, people of different faiths seem able to live together. When the Europeans came they brought their religion with them. This has created some problems between Christians and Muslims in certain areas. But the ASEAN countries by and large have avoided export of religious beliefs. They are content to keep their religion to themselves. This has reduced the tendency towards conflicts between the ASEAN members.

5. But as I say above, religious conflicts do occur in some ASEAN countries. Usually the Governments are not supportive of religious intolerance. But ASEAN Governments of whatever faith do not encourage religious intolerance or allow it to escalate to the point of violence and killings. The leaders of all ASEAN countries do try to put a stop to this violence.

6. In Malaysia the official religion is Islam but the Constitution guarantees that non-Muslims can practise their own religion without hindrance. Currently we are seeing some tension between Muslims and Christians in a few locations. But it has not led to violence. Instead the choice solution is to go to the courts.

7. The fear is that other ASEAN countries may actively support minority co-religionists. This is very tricky when the perception is that they are being oppressed and needs to be helped.

8. I think that ASEAN leaders should express their views and suggestions in private so as not to offend the leaders of the countries concerned. Other public personalities can voice their opinions.

9. Apart from this, cross-cultural collaboration is truly possible. We already have political and economic collaboration but we must always avoid interference in the internal affairs of the members as much as possible. Instead ASEAN countries should try to learn from each other.

10. If certain policies or strategies appear to help in the development of an ASEAN nation or nations, it would be good if we are open and willing to give access to these policies and strategies and their implementation. There was a time when some ASEAN members feared foreign investments. They had just achieved independence from foreign rule and they believed that foreign investors would interfere in their politics and administration. They feared Neo-Colonialism.

11. But then some countries invited foreign companies to invest in their countries. The result was rapid growth in their economy and reduction of the unemployment rate.

12. Slowly the fear of foreign domination was reduced as they observed that the foreigners had not interfered in the internal affairs of the nations in which they invested. Today all ASEAN countries try to attract foreign investments. This has resulted in the development of all members of ASEAN and ASEAN itself. Actually not many groupings of countries have done as well as ASEAN. This is due to the willingness of ASEAN countries to learn from each other despite the differences in terms of culture or policies.

13. It is almost the same with regard to political systems. By and large we accept the democratic free market system. There are glitches and breakdowns sometimes but the belief in democracy is universal with ASEAN countries. Even the most resistant states have moved in the direction of democratic practises. The levels may be different and some foreign observers may not consider some ASEAN countries as democratic at all. It is true that we are not liberal democrats. But the basic tenets of democracy ie the election of the Government by the people is largely practised by ASEAN countries. Sooner or later this will be general throughout ASEAN.

14. ASEAN has never considered differences of culture as a hindrance toward collaboration between them. These differences are usually ignored and attention focused on the desirability of close cooperation. This is because all realise the

benefits of forming a bigger economic entity. It contributes towards trade and economic development.

15. In terms of real culture i.e. that concerned with the fine arts and value systems, there are a lot of differences partly because of differences in religion. The Europeans derived much of their culture from one source, that of the Greek civilisation and later that of the Romans. Thus, outlook on life, values and systems are more or less the same.

16. They are fond of wars and conquest. For over 2000 years, not a year passed without a pair of their countries being at war with each other. Even after they all embrace Christianity and calling Europe Christendom, their war-like ways have not diminished. They will fight almost for the love of it.

17. The culture of ASEAN countries differ much, influenced as they are by their different religions. One would expect religious wars between them. But historically wars were not a common feature of their past. They were largely pacifists. The weak members were willing to submit to and accept the protection of the strong.

18. When the first moves were made to bring SEA countries together, it was actually as a means to avoid wars. The first group consisted of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines (Maphilindo) was formed because of the threat of war against Malaysia. Once peace was restored between these three countries, the grouping was expanded to include Thailand and Singapore. Then Brunei joined and much later Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos became members. The last to join was Myanmar.

19. Clearly these Southeast Asian nations are not warlike. Their common desire for peace was what brought them together. ASEAN was conceived as an institution for the avoidance of war between close neighbours.

20. But newer areas of conflict remained. It is normal for neighbours to have overlapping claims. In other parts of the world this would lead to wars or at least strained relations.

21. There was a period when Malaysia and the Philippines had no diplomatic ties because of the Philippines' claim on the state of Sabah in Malaysia. Although the claim is still there, diplomatic relations between the two was restored. Relations between the two are good.

22. After the Indonesian confrontation with Malaysia ended, dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia arose over the Indonesian claims on two islands off Sabah. Negotiations went on for years. Then both countries decided to go to the World Court, having agreed that they would accept whatever decision was made

by that august body. The World Court decided in favour of Malaysia. The Indonesians were disappointed but gracefully accepted the decision.

23. Then there is a dispute over the ownership of a rock in the straits between Singapore and Malaysia. After years of negotiations, both decided to go to the World Court. The Court decided in favour of Singapore. It was a disappointment for Malaysia but the dispute ended and Malaysia and Singapore can forget about it and establish good relations.

24. Then there is an overlapping claim on the sea to the northeast of Malaysia by Thailand. After years of negotiations the Malaysian PM and his counterpart decided that any gas or oil or other mineral produced from the sea-bed in the disputed area should be divided 50/50 between Malaysia and Thailand. And now we are doing just that. No lives were lost but both are enriched by the gas being produced there.

25. Quite clearly, cross-cultural collaboration is possible amongst ASEAN countries. Because of the anti-war culture and the love of peace, and the friendship between the ASEAN countries, money, time and lives were not lost not through confrontations and war. Such savings must contribute towards the prosperity of the two countries and amongst ASEAN nations.

26. Leadership plays a big role in the affairs between nations. A bellicose and belligerent leader or leaders can lead to confrontation and even wars. The development of ASEAN as a group and as individual nations cannot be achieved through such leaders.

27. Fortunately ASEAN has not seen the truly belligerent leaders leading any of the member countries. The frequent meetings between heads of Governments and other top ranking leaders help to solve any differences or disputes between their countries.

28. In addition, the frequent meetings actually lead to the development of true personal friendship between them. This is very important as it helps to reduce disputes and tensions and overcoming differences between the nations they lead.

29. The languages they speak are also very different from each other. Fortunately most ASEAN leaders speak English. They do not need interpreters. This obviously contributes towards easy understanding and friendship between them and between their countries.

30. It is clear that between ASEAN countries cross-cultural collaboration is not only possible but is actually taking place. And because of this the sustainability of the group and the development of ASEAN is not in doubt. And because of the

benefits of a bigger entity, and close cooperation, their development would also be sustainable.

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