

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH AT THE CONFERMENT OF HONORARY DOCTORATE DEGREE IN
ARTS IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL LEADERSHIP, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND POLITICS BY
RANGSIT UNIVERSITY**

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1. Firstly, let me start by thanking Dr. Arthit Ourairat, the President of Rangsit University for his kind words of which for some of them, I feel I do not deserve. Nonetheless, let me reciprocate to the warm welcome by expressing my deepest thanks and appreciation to the University for inviting me here and conferring on me this Honorary Doctorate. It is indeed an honour.

2. I am humbled by the acknowledgements and am pleased to accept the honour conferred when I am the Prime Minister of Malaysia and thus an honour for my country too.

3. As one of the top private universities in the country, Rangsit University has distinguished itself on many fronts; particularly in the fields of medicine, the arts and the humanities.

4. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate Members of the Faculty and academic staff of Rangsit University for its achievements. Their dedication in making this University as one of the premier institutions of higher learning in Thailand as well as in this region is clearly evident.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. I was recently in Bangkok, in October 2018, for my official visit to Thailand after being sworn in as the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia in May this year. I met the Prime Minister of Thailand and both of us renewed our commitment to further strengthen bilateral cooperation between our two countries.

6. Relations between Malaysia and Thailand had remained strong and friendly throughout the years. Although our diplomatic relations began in 1957 when Malaysia gained its independence (61 years ago), our historical ties and engagements have been much longer than that and could be traced back for centuries. For example, as far back as in the 14th century my home state of Kedah sent bunga mas (golden flowers) to the Thai court as a tribute to Siam.

7. Centuries had passed and history took its course. Our relations blossomed into a friendship through ASEAN in 1960s and have further developed into the current solid partnership in bilateral and regional cooperation.

8. We have had our differences in the past, but it was all resolved through mutual understanding and discussions. These differences have never led us to lose sight of the essential understanding and goodwill in our relationship.

9. On the economic front, Malaysia and Thailand are among each other's top trading partners. Thailand is Malaysia's fifth largest trading partner globally and second largest within ASEAN. Our bilateral trade is growing steadily reaching US\$ 24.6 billion last year, an increase of 18.43 per cent from 2016.

10. Our cross border trade meanwhile accounts for more than 60 per cent of our total bilateral trade, which goes to show the importance of close cooperation and connectivity. We are also key sources of investment and tourism for each other, with close to two million Thais visiting Malaysia last year while over three million Malaysians visited Thailand in the corresponding period.

11. This is an opportunity that we should seize – not only in terms of economic growth but also of promoting greater connectivity and integration between both Malaysia and Thailand that is in line with the spirit of ASEAN integration.

12. Our two nations continue to prosper not only in government-to-government engagements, but also at the level of people-to-people interactions. If there are any who does not subscribe to the policy of “prosper thy neighbour,” have a look at the Malaysia-Thailand relations and these doubts should disappear.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

13. As the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, Malaysia and Thailand continue to play significant roles in ASEAN’s community building and regional integration. It has been the cornerstone for both Malaysia and Thailand’s foreign policy.

14. At the 33rd ASEAN Summit held in Singapore in November 2018, ASEAN leaders have pledged to continue maintaining and promoting peace, security and stability in the region, while embracing the principle of ASEAN Centrality. Indeed, the stability and prosperity of our region rely heavily on a united and integrated ASEAN.

15. Thailand will assume the Chairmanship of ASEAN next year with the theme “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability”. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate Thailand on its Chairmanship and assure you our fullest support on the emphasis given on sustainability. We are confident that under the able leadership of Thailand, ASEAN will continue to move forward together amidst the rapid change and uncertainties in the global landscape.

16. In the economic sphere, ASEAN has brought about many tangible advantages that have made direct financial difference to hundreds of millions.

17. The ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) has been established with zero and near-zero tariffs. This has provided our business community with easier access to markets within our region, reduced the prices of goods and help alleviate poverty within the region.

18. With further liberalisation and integration come still greater prizes: it is estimated that the measures we are implementing under the ASEAN Economic Community will raise overall GDP in ASEAN by seven per cent by 2025. That will be a gain for our economies in the hundreds of billions – directly from ASEAN.

19. ASEAN should leverage on its 630 million population by making the right investments in essential services and projects within its members. In 2017, the ASEAN economy as a whole has expanded by 5.2 per cent and the growth is expected to remain steady throughout the year. This was largely supported by robust domestic demand and solid export performance of many of its Members.

20. Having persevered for the past 51 years – maintaining peace and stability within the region despite its members’ diverse political, economic and cultural fabrics – ASEAN as a regional grouping has indeed been a success.

21. It is worth considering just what else we would not have gained if ASEAN did not exist. There will be increased unemployment in some of the countries in the region. We would not have enjoyed, what we have today, the ease of movement of people from one country to country. We now have the ASEAN lane in all international airports in ASEAN countries, and our people could enjoy a visa-free travel through nine out of the ten ASEAN members.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

22. I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the students of this University. You are the leaders of tomorrow and the hope for our future.

23. To this end, universities play a significant role in providing opportunities and support for the students to explore new knowledge and realise their potential.

24. Providing the necessary support and facilities to encourage the students to do research should be one of the priorities for government. In developing countries, universities that focus on research activities are growing in numbers.

25. While research universities in this part of the world have not yet achieved high global rankings, they play crucial roles in making it possible to join and compete in the global knowledge society. I am encouraged to note that Rangsit University is already moving towards that. I look forward

to see further cooperation between Rangsit and the universities in Malaysia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

26. Before I conclude, I would like to once again thank the University for conferring on me the Honorary Doctorate. I deeply value the recognition and I shall strive to contribute further to my people and the world if possible. To the graduates, I am sure you will be the future leaders and architects of your nation. Congratulations on your graduation and I wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

Thank you.

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