

By : DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB TUN ABD RAZAK
Venue : GRAND BALLROOM LEVEL 1, RITZ CARLTON
MILLENIA, SINGAPORE
Date : 29-09-2005
Title : KEYNOTE ADDRESS ASIAN LEADERSHIP FORUM 2005 : THE
NEW MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure and an honour for me to be here to share with you my thoughts on Southeast Asia. Allow me to record my deepest appreciation to Timothy Ong, the convenor of this ASEAN 100 Leaders Conference for the kind invite. Your effort in putting this Forum together as well as the presence of so many of us today, are certainly a reflection of the dynamism that exists in this part of the world.

I often cringed when I hear predictions made especially political ones. Someone once said that "Man has an incurable habit of not fulfilling the prophecies of his fellow men". Being in the political arena for nearly thirty years, I know that the ball doesn't always bounce the way you want it. Political life has a funny way of turning out, in many cases, the ones you least suspect. I am reminded of what Nikita Khrushchev once said, "The main difference for the history of the world if I had been shot rather than Kennedy, is that Onassis probably wouldn't have married Mrs. Khrushchev".

As far as praises are concerned, one is reminded of what British Prime Minister Ted Heath once said, "If politicians lived on praise and thanks they'd be forced into some other line of business".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not here before you today to paint a wonderful picture when it is not.

I am certainly not here before you to tell you that there is prosperity and plenty in the region when poverty and despair still exist.

However, I am going to stand here in front of you this morning to give you a reality check. At the time when the region and all of us are faced with a gargantuan task of overcoming the myriad of challenges in what is already a highly competitive and complex world, it is so critical to provide a frank assessment of the stark realities.

The Southeast Asia of today has both the new and the old. As a region, we have experienced a paradoxical history. We have seen some of the bloodiest and protracted conflicts, genocide, repression, while at the same time; we have witnessed impressive unprecedented economic developments taking place.

At the end of the Second World War, we were all under the yolk of colonialism, where notions of freedom were either being nurtured or were just illusions and dreams, and to most a long struggle lies ahead.

The decades of the 50s and the 60s saw the birth of many Southeast Asian states with some being engulfed in the battlefields of the Cold War and conflicts that were

the results of internal dissensions and contradictions. This period also witnessed the establishment of ASEAN, which gave a ray of hope for the future, by laying the foundation of regionalism.

The 1970s and most of 1980s, saw the parallel development of new conflicts and at the same time, emerging prosperity for some. With the fall of Saigon in April 1975, there were signs of relief and many thought that peace was finally at hand. But peace escaped us all, this was not to be as we saw a new round of instability, with Pol Pot taking Cambodia to year Zero, and followed by his ouster and invasion of that country by Vietnamese forces. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the eventual demise of communism as a threatening ideology, paved the way for peace to reach Southeast Asia, at last.

The 1990s saw a period of prosperity but only to be destroyed by the speculators, which plunged our economies into disarray. Resilience have allowed us to make a come back and today the financial crisis of 1997 is behind us although the lessons are still fresh with us.

The 21st Century comes with it a greater demand for our political, economic and financial systems to be much more opened, much more accountable and much more transparent. In an ever increasing world of interdependency and interconnectivity, Southeast Asia is poised to take up the challenge.

We are such a diverse region. We boast some of the most dynamic economies of the world; with very promising emerging markets; we have a great pool of industrious workers and competent managers; we also have a newer and younger set of leaders, both at the local, corporate and political levels.

However, Southeast Asia also has a high level of poverty in its midst; underdevelopment still exists; many groups are disenfranchised and marginalized; it still faces a plethora of political and security challenges; and as a region, some argued it is less cohesive than before.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have won the peace following decades of destruction and despair. But are we now able to maintain and sustain peace in our times and for the future? After all, peace has been defined as a period in between wars. We are seeing cracks today and we must repair them for like a dam or an edifice, small cracks will eventually lead to the collapse of structures, which once stood tall.

The rise of religiosity today, manifesting in extreme forms of violence, appears to be sweeping across most of the globe. It is not about a clash of civilization. Neither is it about a clash between good and evil. It is about the expression of frustration through violence, a feeling of hopelessness, a sense of fatalistic destruction and the exploitation of man by man and the manipulation of the majority by the minority.

This has produced a major conundrum for both Muslim and non-Muslim countries for there appear to be no solution in sight.

It seems to me that we have to adopt a dual track approach by essentially striking a balance between the use of force and the use of a softer approach in order to win the population, which could be exploitable and mesmerized by the extreme radical forces

of religion. We need to push forth a moderate voice, which I believe is the voice of the majority. There is now the tyranny of the minority, and we need to wrestle back the control of religion from the extremists to the moderates. In this respect, I would like to mention our Prime Minister, Dato'Seri Abdullah Badawi's Islamic Hadhari approach, which stresses more on the civilisational aspects of the religion. To us, to live on earth and to do good for the family and the community is as good as for the hereafter. We hope that this new approach would help to put the moderate voice at the epicenter of Islam.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Southeast Asia must create a much more prosperous region, not just for the elite, or the middle class, but for everyone. To paraphrase the British jurist and philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, we need to bring happiness to the greatest number. We may well need to change our mind-set, by broadening our concept of wealth – it has to be shared wealth, based on equitable distribution, for this is the only way growth can be sustained. Uneven growth, uneven distribution will only create time bombs that could one day be activated as the masses become aware of their plight.

While there are failed states in some parts of the world, Southeast Asia has achieved a high degree of stability. However, it must never remain static for anything static is dead. As part of this process is the need for institutional building, as well as capacity building. To me, our institutions need to be strengthened, so that they would withstand the force of personalities.

We are often weak in implementation and enforcement. We may have the best ideas but things will not materialise, if they do not get translated into policies and then implemented. We must strive to improve our legislatures, to make them more effective; our judiciaries, to make them more credible; as well as the various branches of the executive, in order to make them more accountable and to be able to implement and execute their tasks judiciously. We must strengthen the public's confidence and faith in the system.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Businessmen cherish stability, not just in the political sense, but also the economic and commercial environment. You all certainly do not want moving goal posts, where things keep changing, including regulations. The rule of law is an important and growing concern for investors. In the area of equity investments, strong and independent regulatory bodies, such as securities commissions, are part and parcel of what I have in mind when I refer to institutional building.

Let us not forget the construction of social institutions. Education is high on everyone's agenda and we are grappling with the demands of this sector. The acquisition of knowledge is fast becoming a necessity and no longer a luxury. With greater numbers of our population gaining access to education, with those entering tertiary levels ever increasing, the state must be able to meet such demands. Apart from education, we need to build social safety nets, in order to catch marginalised groups so that they do not fall to neglect. In a highly competitive world, people could easily find themselves being marginalized and as human resources are considered to be so critical, we must maximize this factor.

I think we should ensure that there is sufficient social mobility. In traditional sectors,

such as agriculture, this must be modernized, by introducing mechanization. We have to reduce our dependency on this sector, and instead, to move people engaged in this area, to other more dynamic sectors, such as the service industry. Therefore, apart from vertical development, we need to increasingly move horizontally, so that our human resources are utilized for its maximum potential.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While we may argue about the extent of democracy that exists within our political boundaries, there is a growing recognition that democracy, with all its imperfections, remains the most viable system that would guarantee long term stability.

To me, democracy is about providing access to your populations to the state and its decision-making processes. The more democracy you have the less the ruler is alone before he decides. However, democracy is not an end in itself and most definitely not a panacea. It is a process, it is like the quest for the Holy Grail, where we continue to search for the ideal state, which may not exist, but we nonetheless continue to strive for it. We must never impose democracy from the outside, but rather it must be home-grown. In our approach towards promoting democracy, we must be realistic and pragmatic and never be too ideological and dogmatic. Democracy has to be nurtured and it cannot be born overnight. Those who naively believe that it could be achieved at a blink of an eye will have a rude awakening.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe, leadership, whether at national, at the corporate or local levels, is indispensable to success. Leaders have to take the lead to ride the challenges and to bring us out of the sea of danger. I believe the highest form of leadership is transformational leadership. Leaders that are able to move and change societies and nations are those that are at the apex of leadership. However, increasingly, I believe performance is the key determinant of success for leaders. Leaders today, at all levels, must perform for performance is inextricably linked to leadership.

Leaders must not merely be contented with just having a vision, for equally, this has to be translated into some meaningful results, and not just for decorations on the walls of meaningless halls of fame. As it has been said,

“Vision without action is merely a dream
Action without vision passes the time,
Vision and Action can change the world”.

Despite the existence of countless of visionary statements, we see little transformation taking place. Very few nations have been able to undertake an economic and societal revolution; few corporations have been able to transform themselves to make them relevant in an ever changing world. Words like re-engineering and re-inventing have fallen to become mere clichés which leaders use, but often short of making the changes required. Sometimes, I feel that we are basking in our past glories, unaware or just too confident that others are not going to catch up and overtake us. The great story teller Aesop has reminded a whole bunch of generations of how an overconfident rabbit could be overtaken by the extra slow, but highly determined and motivated tortoise.

Economically, we are witnessing the emergence of both China and India on the world

stage. Like it or loath it, we need to ride the tide of the rise of these two great Asian civilizations. There are opportunities out there and governments are providing the political and economic tracks for the business trains to operate. This public-private partnership is indeed a sure winner, provided we are bold enough to move.

With globalization, we are far more integrated into the world economy. ASEAN, through several frameworks has ensured this. The ASEAN Free Trade Area, the many bilateral FTAs, and its members' participation in the WTO, will all help to shape our future. The coming East Asia Summit, which has taken the principle of being inclusive, is the latest framework for regional states to come together to discuss common issues in order to find common solutions – not one solution that fits all, but rather solutions that are applicable to all.

Southeast Asia and Asia have a whole gamut of political issues that have remained outstanding, somehow refusing to go away. Perhaps it is because we are not determined enough to tackle and solve them. Bilateral issues are plenty and I think we should pursue a multidimensional perspective in tackling them. There are issues that could be regarded as intractable and as such we should not get bogged down by them to the extent that they become obstacles and hindrances to bilateral ties. However, there are issues that could be dealt with and with the right kinds of political will and determination we should try to be engaged.

We must be intellectually honest to admit that our regional foundation is not as strong as it should be. Yes, we have many regional institutions, but often when the crunch comes, such institutions are rendered ineffective or that we ignore their existence, preferring to either 'go it alone' or to seek the help of extra-regional powers. Therefore, we must strengthen regional resilience, and that of regionalism, not just by creating newer regional institutions but to strengthen existing ones as well as to build bilateral frameworks. By so doing, like building blocks, we can strengthen the foundation by which Southeast Asia is built upon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time has come for us to face up to the challenge and not shy away and bury our heads in the sand.

The time has come for us to face the reality, to try our best, make every effort, bear every burden, to tackle the challenges head on and not to push to the next generation to solve.

The time has come for us to take up the responsibility for this generation for the next generation.

The time has come for us to do something good, for the good of others – ideally, to provide a cornucopia of good things to our population.

The time has come for us to face the future, to even create the future ourselves.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time has indeed arrived for us to be together, and not to walk away from one another. To be united and face the challenges, I believe, is the only way for us to shape the future we want and not a future which is created by others for others. It is

about the creation of a common destiny for our common good. We have crossed the Rubicon so let us do the right thing and go forth to take up the challenge and surge forward for the betterment of mankind.

I thank you.