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Title : 1ST MALAYSIA - ASEAN BLOGGERS FORUM

1. First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Exco of the Blog House, I believe all 14 of them which include a lady blogger Datuk Nuraina Samad for organising this First Malaysia-Asean Bloggers Forum. This is indeed a splendid initiative given the explosion of the Internet, the social media, blogs, and microblogging such as Twitter.

2. This inaugural forum gives me the singular pleasure of saying Selamat Datang to the bloggers from our neighboring countries Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia.

3. I am told the Asean bloggers who are here include some of their most influential, including heads of the countries' respective blogger associations and a lady blogger from Jakarta who is also the author of 17 books. One or two are here using pseudonyms due to the political situation back home, or something to that effect. Anyway, pseudonyms and anonymity are still quite common on blogosphere. I just hope you have come into this country using your real names and genuine passports. Unlike the borderless world of the Internet, we are still separated by real geographical boundaries guarded by immigration and customs officers, and sometimes border patrols! In any case, I hope all of you are enjoying your stay and will take time after this forum to enjoy more of our great Malaysian hospitality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

4. Asean, the regional body that our forefathers had established to foster unity and enhance cooperation among governments in the Southeast Asian region, is 44 years old this year. Nobody can deny that it has achieved many great things. Together, we represent 600 million people and combined GDP of USD1.8 trillion. Individually, our countries are democracies - some older than the others - and despite the great disparities between ethnic groups and religions, we have co-existed peacefully. What disputes we have are resolved through proper channels with the aim of keeping that peace and prosperity.

5. These, we in Asean have achieved amid a global environment best described as unpredictable, sometimes even volatile. Just scan the news on North Africa and West Asia and we hear and read of daily waves of protests in the streets and armed rebellion in cities and villages.

6. Governments of today are being challenged not just with the use of guerillas and mercenaries armed to the teeth with deadly weapons but also by the deployment of cybertroopers who wage viral warfare with the might of their keyboards and keypads and smartpone, as the Iran "Twitter" Revolution in 2009 manifested.

7. Even the so-called open democracies of the West are not spared by this viral cyber warfare. The arrival of Wikileaks, especially the disclosure of highly confidential communication between government, has forced even the US to review its position on Digital Democracy. Nothing is secret anymore. As you are aware, even some juicy diplomatic cables involving governments in our region were recently exposed by Wikileaks, causing a little bit of discomfort on the part of certain quarters.

8. For the first time, governments in the West which have been promoting the freedom of expression and freedom of information are forced to review their positions. Some of their politicians are calling a gag on the Internet, or at least some form of government controls and regulations, in the name of national security.

9. Such is the power of the Internet today. Facebook, Twitter and blogs have given individuals the power to influence one another and shape the views of the masses. In an increasing number of cases, these Social Media apparatus have become the means to galvanize the masses and make them march against the Establishment. In some cases, these have led to the downfall of regimes and governments. At the very least, they create havoc and instability.

10. The mobile phone, or the handheld, is a necessity for us to communicate. Once it was a luxury that only a few could afford but today it is available to the masses. Armed with WiFi or high-speed broadband, and applied with the SMS and other forms of text mails, that handheld can become an enemy of the State!

11. In Malaysia, which has a population of 27 million and which has set its sight on becoming a high-income nation by 2020, there are said to be million registered handheld today. We are also one of the most ardent Facebook fans - there were 10, 141, 500 (10.1 million) FB users. Before our last General Election in March 2003, some five hundred thousand blogs were already in existence. Mind you, that was before Tun Dr Mahathir started his blog, which has attracted over 30 million unique visitors and inspired an army of other bloggers!

12. I have no doubts whatsoever that Malaysia has one of liveliest blogospheres in the world. And definitely one of the freest if not the most free. Malaysian have to thank Tun Dr Mahathir again for this. When he was the Prime Minister, and Malaysia was developing our Multimedia Super Corridor, Tun made the promise to the world that Malaysia would never censor the Internet. My administration is fully committed to that wisdom. We intend to keep his word.

Ladies and gentlemen,

13. Last week, Malaysia held its first state election since the 12th General Election in March 2008. The Barisan Nasional which I lead won the Sarawak state election with a thumping two-thirds majority. When the reporters asked me about the victory, I said that "open democracy and the online media (in other words, Digital Democracy)" have made it more difficult and more challenging to win elections. That is the fact of the matter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. It is also a fact that the Malaysian government, just as the other governments in Asean, continue to spend and invest to promote open democracy and Digital democracy. Malaysia is spending RM11 billion just on high-speed broadband. We have a scheme to provide free laptops to a million people, including school children, in the interior. The private sector spends billions every year on infrastructure and R&D, and to get that smartphone or latest Tab or Playbook to the market.

15. I am not sure why other governments do it, especially if it's true that these told of the Internet can be a pain in the neck. But on behalf of my own Government, I can say for certain that it is because we know that this is the way forward. We will continue to practise open democracy, and as Digital Democracy is concerned, it is inevitable, that it would be silly - perhaps even futile - for governments to resist or ignore.

16. Also, we believe that the Internet is an engine for economic growth, the portal that opens up to a knowledge society. This is applicable to all societies; even a government that is not too keen about the "democracy" part of "Digital democracy" should embrace the "digital" part, as the economic implications are simply too great to ignore.

17. Applied properly, the Social media, blogging and microblogging are capable of bringing our nations closer. Imagine, for the first time in the history of mankind, our people are able to communicate with each other in real time and without having to wait for days or even weeks for the mail. An Anonymous blogger in Singapore can go into a blog run by someone in Thailand and interact, without any kind of intervention. An Indonesian with a Twitter account can take part in a thread of tweets by Malaysians and help put things in perspective and avoid the kind of misunderstandings that have plagued our nations in the past.

18. Take the latest tsunami that hit Japan. People were Facebooking, YouTubing, Meeting and Blogging to keep the world abreast, and the same Internet tools were used to help bring relief to the affected Japanese.

Ladies and gentlemen,

19. There is no limit to the good that blogging can bring about to our nations and our region, Asean. For that to happen, the bloggers in these region need to come together in a formal manner. Yes, of course, this could pose a bigger threat to governments but that's I believe is an extreme view. I am an optimistic, in the sense that I believe that more good can come off of this union.

20. That is why I did not hesitate when Tuan Syed Akbar from the Blog House Malaysia invited me to speak at this inaugural forum today. I was told that this meeting would bring together hundreds of Malaysian bloggers with key bloggers from Asean. I think it is a noble attempt to bring the blogging fraternity of Asean closer together. For the local bloggers, I am sure the face-to-face interaction would enrich them, and create a new awareness of their greater surroundings.

21. It is very exciting to learn that the Asean bloggers and their counterparts from the Blog House of Malaysia have come out with a Kuala Lumpur Declaration. And that Declaration underscores a desire to pursue common aspirations, ones that we, the governments of Asean hold to, dearly as well. I am honored that you have decided to share

these aspirations with me. Rest assured, I take such feedback very seriously as I am aware that you represent not just yourselves or your blogs and Twitter, but millions of readers and followers.

22. I would like to take this opportunity as well to congratulate the Blog House of Malaysia for involving the private sector companies as sponsors and participants. Corporations are already doing business on the Internet but you have provided these companies a platform to reach out to the people behind the blogs and microbes, and vice versa.

23. I wish all of you a happy and fruitful interaction. To our guests from Asean, I look forward to reading about your experience - hopefully pleasant ones - on your blogs.