



SPEECH BY

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**“30 YEARS AFTER *THE ASIAN RENAISSANCE*:
STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FOR ASEAN”**

**IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE CONFERMENT OF
HONORARY DOCTORATE BY THE UNIVERSITY
OF THE PHILIPPINES**

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PHILIPPINES

(Salutations)

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. I stand before you this morning, greatly honoured by the presence of such an august gathering of intellectual luminaries, dignitaries, and eminent leaders. I feel doubly privileged and, at the same time, deeply humbled by the conferment of this honorary doctorate by the University of the Philippines, undoubtedly an institution of higher learning of great glory and magnificence. Words escape me to express my profound and infinite gratitude. So, let me just say: *Maraming salamat mula sa kaibuturan ng aking puso* (Thank you very much, from the bottom of my heart.)

Ladies and gentlemen,

2. In 1993, ASEAN was on the cusp of major expansion, which would eventually bring in all the then independent nations in Southeast Asia. Vietnam joined in 1995, followed by Laos and Myanmar two years later. Cambodia followed suit in 1999.
3. ASEAN has changed dramatically in 30 years, which has led to greater achievements and opportunities even as we faced headlong our trials and tribulations. We have gone from a monolithic global order to a bipolar world to now a multipolar world.

4. Yet, certain things remain, or as some would venture to say: “*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*”– the more things change, the more they stay the same. That might be putting it rather cynically but let’s do a quick reality check.
5. Global cooperation remains essential, ancient as well as conventional trade routes must be maintained for the stability and peace of the world, and that rests on ASEAN just as much as it does China, the US, or Europe or anyone else. The COVID-19 pandemic spared none of us. Geopolitical tensions and conflicts unleash consequences well beyond borders.
6. For Asia in general, and particularly for ASEAN, our identities remain the same, that is, diverse and multicultural, yet united in the dignity of the nations we have carved out for ourselves in our colonial struggles and our adjustments to a globalised world. Conceptually, this was well articulated by the greatest of Malaysians, Dr. José Rizal, in *The Philippines a Century Hence*, that this nation had gone from a scattered collection of islands, languages, cultures, and people but now is united as a Philippine Nation.¹

¹ José Rizal, *The Philippines - A Century Hence*, Editor: Austin Craig; Translator: Charles Derbyshire, 2011

7. Nonetheless, Dr Rizal warned against the sliding into the comfort zone of routine which “is a declivity down which many governments slide.” Indeed, as we extrapolate this in the context of ASEAN, we could make a case that routine has led, to a certain extent, to the erosion of our bonds as individual states which must be united in the common cause of peace and stability. Even worse, routine has allowed the world to fall behind our future potential. Routine tells us to be divided in opinion and to hate one another, fuelled by the convenience and routine of social media, fake news, misplaced nationalism, and certainly, Islamophobia.
8. The question is, what have we learned? We should not simply fear words – Communism, left, right, Muslim, Christian, Jew, capitalist, socialist, etc. No words can be cast aside if they have not been thought through.
9. Today, ASEAN is a larger and more integrated association. We are now a community, with three distinct pillars – political security, economic, and socio-political. The ASEAN Community, its focus and scope, is in itself, a significant achievement. Yet while being more integrated, it is an organisation that has retained its plurality and sovereignty.
10. The doctrine of ASEAN centrality is supposedly cast in stone. Yet, some, both inside and outside ASEAN, have questioned the effectiveness and efficiency of the regional organisation and this mantra of centrality. Criticisms particularly focus on

two of its principles – decision-making by consensus, and non- interference.

11. These critics often miss the central point – ASEAN would not have grown or evolved without these key boundaries being in place. And lest we forget, we are now heading into a larger grouping, with the impending admission of Timor Leste as the eleventh member.
12. When I wrote *The Asian Renaissance*² in 1996, the East Asian region had undergone a period of transformative economic growth. The region's average annual GDP growth for the three decades to 1996 was approximately 6.5 per cent.
13. These were heady days indeed. It gave Asians a spring in their step, a renewed sense of confidence in ourselves, no doubt grounded in the gritty and harsh reality of decades of hard work, frugal spending, self-reliance and a strong focus on educating our youth.

² Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, 1996

14. Today, decision-making by consensus continues to be a central tenet of ASEAN. This, however, does not mean that ASEAN should remain silent over developments in member states that affect the wider region, or particularly egregious violations of the ASEAN Charter by its own members. In all honesty, I believe that non-interference is not a license for indifference.
15. Indeed, Wittgenstein, regarded by many as the greatest philosopher of the 20th century – as far as the West is concerned – reminds us that “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”.³ But that’s because words have power, greater than the destructive and hateful actions of a few. Yet, if left unwritten and unread, then we are all in a lot of trouble.
16. Hence, when I mentioned in Bangkok recently about the need to temporarily carve out Myanmar, on account of the blatant human rights violations, it was said in the larger context of the imperative to stay true to one of the key ideals of ASEAN, which is nothing less than to stand for the cause of justice and the rule of law.

³ Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

17. In this regard, it bears repeating these immortal lines from Dr Rizal, who I must reiterate, remains truly an Asian Renaissance Man, that “Justice is the foremost virtue of the civilising races. It subdues the barbarous nations, while injustice arouses the weakest.”
18. In the pursuit of justice, let us therefore celebrate our differences and praise our national unities. Let us look beyond our divergences and amplify our commonalities so that we can stand as cooperative partners working towards the betterment of all our people in a just and peaceful world. Hence, cooperation and collaboration across the board in all the crucial matters that bind us as a solid multilateral, multicultural, and diverse regional grouping must be the way forward for ASEAN.

Ladies and gentlemen,

19. Back in 1996, here in the Philippines, I spoke of the Christian poet Dante Alighieri and how in his *Divine Comedy*, he skilfully wove the political convulsions of the Italy of his time into a universal, and timeless drama of the human predicament. Now, even after seven centuries, the question is, are we still entrapped in *selva obscura*, our own hard and savage dark wood of prejudice, confusion and uncertainty, or have we freed ourselves from the stranglehold of captive geopolitics, media-influenced mindsets, and zero-sum approaches on

questions of national sovereignty?

20. Till today, I still ask myself: in the continuum of Machiavellian machinations to Metternichian manoeuvres, where do we stand? In focussing on the minutiae are we not at risk of missing the forest for the trees?
21. And what exactly is this forest – this big picture that continues to elude our vision? I humbly submit that what was articulated nearly 30 years ago in *The Asian Renaissance*, remains valid in that we are still groping in the dark in search of the guiding ideas of civilization.
22. Indeed, while it has been said that the articulation of moral and political ideas, socio-cultural values, the institution of the family, and faith, is no longer the exclusive domain of the modern West, the fact is that this is not borne out by reality. The stranglehold of the international media, dominated by the rich and the powerful, in setting the narrative remains as tenacious as the proverbial lobster. Hence, in this exalted university and its rarefied air of academic and intellectual excellence, I urge for the resurgence of a robust and spirited cultural, social and political discourse of our time, without the need to be blindsided by the irrational exuberance of anti-Enlightenment or indeed unwarranted jingoistic rhetoric.
23. To my mind, before us, remains a challenge so formidable that it transcends even the quest for a new world order. I say 'remains' because it isn't one that has sprung up overnight

but one that has latched on to us like a leech which simply refuses to let go. And this challenge is nothing short of the reconstruction of civilization itself. In facing this, we need to go beyond economic prosperity and political vitality to deep dive into the very foundations of humanitarian and civilizational ideals such as justice, compassion and moral uprightness.

24. Without these firm foundations, no political order in the global context can remain for long. It is true that the Asian economy, as led by the phenomenal leapfrogging of China on to the top in terms of growth ranking, continues to gain attention. And ASEAN, not merely being within the region in geographical terms, is also strategically linked within the framework of a rules based multilateral trading system that is now bolstered by the world's largest FTA, namely, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Nonetheless, economic growth, no matter how robust and the accumulation of wealth, no matter how vigorous, should never be attained on the sacrificial altar of justice, compassion and moral uprightness.

25. I believe that it is only when faith and religious practice as underscored with justice and compassion, finds its convergence with economic prosperity, will society stay on the path of real and meaningful progress.

Bereft of this, all the “voyage of our life will be bound in shallows and in miseries.”⁴ This is not an academic issue. We’ve seen this before and we are seeing it still. For instance, today we continue to see men being exploited by their fellow men, *l’exploitation de l’homme par l’homme*, in the political and economic spheres, an exploitation which has spread to the rape of the environment, impacting the physical world we live in.

⁴ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

26. In light of this, talk of strategic pathways for ASEAN, going forward, will ring hollow if the agenda for social justice remains only on the back burner, or if concerns on climate change and green-house gas emissions are only given lip service. These matters cannot wait. Housing, education, health must be of paramount concern. Hence, in the last three months of my taking office as Prime Minister, I have placed poverty eradication, reduction of cost of living, food security as well as health and education as overriding concerns. Certainly, within the larger context of ASEAN, I believe these concerns are no less important, and if we pool our efforts in dealing with these recurrent challenges, that will take us to economic sustainability and greater ASEAN cohesiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

27. In closing, let me congratulate the Philippines and the Filipino people for the courage of their convictions in the cause of democracy. You have demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are able to confront arrogant powers and show to us, in ASEAN and beyond, that defeat in times of trouble is not an option.

28. You have shown that democracy is not a mere slogan to be bandied about only in times of elections and that rightfully used, democracy does empower the people to determine their future for the better. In this regard, we too, in Malaysia,

have recently undergone that same process where democracy has enabled me to take on the responsibility and trust of leading my people.

29. Like the Philippines, I share with you that we will have no truck with religious intolerance, injustice, greed, and exploitation. On the contrary, like you too, good governance and democratic accountability will form the pillars of my administration that is underscored by the principles formulated as a philosophy of nationhood known as *Madani Malaysia*.
30. In ASEAN, while we have arisen from the shackles of the colonial masters, we must remain ever vigilant against our own home-grown masters and this warrants a revisiting and review of our ethics and values. But let us not be fettered by the fear of failure. Instead, let us continue to build upon our communities on the firm foundations of a humane economy, compassion, justice, inclusiveness and shared prosperity.

Thank you.