

**Presidential Lecture & Acceptance of the Conferment of the Grand
Collar of the Order of Timor-Leste**

“ASEAN & the Role of Timor-Leste”

**by the Honourable Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia
24 September 2025**

Introduction

Your Excellency, José Manuel Ramos-Horta,
President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Your Excellency José Alexandre "Xanana" Gusmão,
Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

A very good morning, *bom dia*, *dadeer di'ak*, and selamat pagi.

1. At the outset let me express my heartfelt gratitude to His Excellency President Ramos-Horta for the invitation to deliver the Presidential Lecture and for the conferment of the Grand Collar of the Order of Timor-Leste. It truly is a singular honour for me to be here today.
2. Timor-Leste is set to join ASEAN as its 11th member next month, a momentous occasion indeed, which Malaysia has long championed and supported.

ASEAN's long-term vision

3. In May, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 was adopted, charting the future direction for the next two decades, towards realising a resilient, innovative, dynamic and people-centred community.
4. It also envisions a developed ASEAN as the epicentre of growth in the Indo-Pacific region. This is not a mere exercise in rhetoric but a clear and bold statement by ASEAN of its sense of self.
5. As co-chair to the High-Level Task Force for the past few years, Malaysia was deeply cognisant of both the realities and significance of 2025. This was why we adopted the theme of Inclusivity and Sustainability – simple in articulation but consequential in realisation.
6. As we aspire for truly shared progress, so that no one is left behind, ASEAN is committed towards strengthening regional peace, stability and prosperity within an inclusive, sustainable and future-oriented framework.

ASEAN's contemporary challenges

7. ASEAN has gone through thick and thin, persevered and grown. Yet the lessons of the past few years reinforce what our founding fathers knew back then – our unity, cohesion and centrality are not a given. They have waxed and waned through our near six decades of existence.

8. Rhetoric aside, ASEAN's cohesion and centrality must be earned and re-earned, and fortified. A divided ASEAN will only hamper the collective vision for a peaceful and prosperous region. Therefore, efforts toward ASEAN unity must continue, especially when the region is facing myriad challenges.
9. The rise of transnational crime, divisive great-power rivalry, economic inequities, and double standards in the application of international laws and norms – these are formidable challenges that require earnest resolve to overcome. But even more intractable and insidious are the atrocities perpetrated against the weak and the downtrodden such as the genocide inflicted on the Palestinians.
10. The people of Timor-Leste do not need to be told what it means to be oppressed, to be persecuted and to have violence and bloodletting inflicted on them for you have gone through and suffered the mayhem and atrocities.
11. But you have also emerged stronger, more durable and more resolved not to have such cruelty being perpetrated against you or other vulnerable people. And while some nations have demonstrated moral cowardice in spite of being even more economically advanced than Timor-Leste, you have demonstrated the courage of your moral convictions against cruelty and sheer injustice.

12. In this vein, the theme of sustainability and inclusivity reflects a bold, urgent vision for our region, based on interdependent approaches. It behoves ASEAN to take on a more proactive role in all spectrums of cooperation, especially in the political-security and economic domains, which are increasingly intertwined. What ASEAN cannot afford is inaction or lethargy. In its own way, Malaysia has made the call, and I hope all of ASEAN will pay heed.

13. We have always overcome challenges and pushed the boundaries of success when we do so together. Not when we pit one against the other, or work to exclude some from cooperation and progress. We are successful together or not at all. I am confident that this is an approach rooted in values shared here in Timor-Leste.

The role of Timor-Leste in ASEAN

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. While Timor-Leste will be ASEAN's youngest and smallest member state, it certainly does not lack in determination to participate in the regional agenda. The road is long and winding. I believe it was President Ramos-Horta himself who mentioned some years ago that it was easier to reach the gates of heaven than the gates of ASEAN.

15. Yet Mr. President, you, your government and your country persevered with the processes of full accession to ASEAN and here we are on the cusp of a worthy and truly well-earned achievement.

16. It was this forward-looking resolve that stood out most to me and many others. If nurtured and channelled strategically, I am confident that Timor-Leste will very quickly become a key, proactive member of ASEAN with a meaningful and productive role.
17. For instance, Timor-Leste has demonstrated a strong commitment to peacebuilding, dialogue and reconciliation, as well as democratic check-and-balance and accountability. This is crucial for ASEAN and its member states as it commences Vision 2045. To be truly effective, ASEAN must transcend catering to governments and other elites and be truly people-centric.
18. If you hold the course domestically on principled positions and values in governance, there is no reason why Timor-Leste could not become ASEAN's moral sounding board.
19. As ASEAN continues to drive efforts to broaden its regional engagements with other groupings, Timor-Leste can facilitate new inroads, particularly with the Lusophone world. With 9 member nations and a further 35 associate observers and growing collaboration on its agenda, this community should be on our radar.
20. And to germinate those connections and collaborations, it would be plainly advantageous for ASEAN to have a member state that has already been a part of the Lusophone Community for over two decades. I should mention at this juncture that my good friend President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, a key mover within the Community and also within the broader Global South, will be attending the ASEAN Summit next month.

21. Another connection which immediately comes to mind is on ASEAN's relationship with small Pacific Island nations. ASEAN and the Pacific Island Forum have taken tentative steps to greater collaboration. I look forward to Timor-Leste playing an active role in advancing this cooperation, based on shared interests and further connecting ASEAN with this key region in the Indo Pacific.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

22. As I intimated at the start, when President Ramos-Horta communicated with the intention to confer on me the Grand Collar of the Order of Timor-Leste, I was both humbled and grateful to receive your nation's highest and most prestigious honour.
23. I note that this Order was previously awarded to esteemed leaders such as Presidents Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo of Indonesia, President Hun Sen of Cambodia, and His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei. I count them as personal friends, peers and mentors. Each has contributed meaningfully to their own national development and that of Southeast Asia.
24. With sincerity, humility and gratitude, I accept this honour on behalf of the people of Malaysia.

Thank you, *obrigado*, terima kasih,