

PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP TOWARDS THE REALISATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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INTRODUCTION

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh. It gives me great pleasure to be here today at this gathering by the Asian Youth Forum, one where many nations of Asia, and all state parties to the ASEAN Charter are in attendance, and, in my capacity as the Chief Executive of the Centre for Human Rights Research and Advocacy (CENTHRA) in Malaysia. I have been invited by the organisers of this Forum to give a short lecture and thus I shall speak on *Peace, Democracy and Regional Partnership Towards the Realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.*

In my lecture, which hopefully will not take up too much of your time, I shall touch upon how the role democracy has in ensuring good governance, and how, particularly in diverse societies, the will of the majority needs to be tempered with special consideration for the needs of minorities. I shall also share the Malaysian experience with regard to balancing conflicting interests that arise out of governing these diverse societies. Lastly I shall touch on the sense of camaraderie already existing amongst the members of ASEAN and

how this can be strengthened towards creating a long lasting partnership that will assist in the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that have been agreed at the United Nations (UN) last year as the successor of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were agreed before.

PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly. It is an invention of the Greeks and the root term is *demokratia* meaning rule of the people. The first democratic societies were the city-states of ancient Greece. Among the more well-known of these are Athens and Sparta, among others. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote in his well-known work, *The Republic*, that the democratic form of government, led by a philosopher king, is the best kind. The philosopher king, according to Plato, knows what is best for the state and steers it, like a ship, towards the realisation of the common good of all the citizenry.

Owing to the expansion of Western colonialization throughout the past centuries, democracy as a system of governance has become a fixture of all nation states throughout the globe. In Malaysia, due to our status as a former protectorate of Britain, we have inherited from the British the Westminster style of government as reflected in our Constitution, which divides the same into the executive, legislative and judicial branch, each to act independently of one another, and act as a check and balance, reflecting the Dicey ideal that too much concentration of power corrupts and that separation of powers is

necessary to ensure rule of law. Alas, this was not to remain for the Malaysian Parliament amended our Constitution to remove any reference to the judicial powers of the courts, and subject them to have jurisdiction only as conferred by federal law, thus subordinating them to Parliament. This imperfect state of affairs governance wise notwithstanding, Malaysia has nonetheless maintained a stable policy throughout the decades that have passed since the attainment of our independence in 1957, enabling us to focus on expanding our economy. Our experience in this regard is not dissimilar to our neighbour down south, the Republic of Singapore. The island republic, having had a tumultuous history, has also had a Constitution that is not strict with the doctrine of separation of powers, enabling a virtual one party state. Yet it is this precise characteristic that enabled Singapore to prosper and become the economic juggernaut that it is today. Likewise, other ASEAN member states such as Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and most recently, Burma, otherwise known as Myanmar, have had periods of non-democratic rule before transforming into democracies as we know them today. Myanmar's transition is notable for being the most recent.

Myanmar in fact, is of special note for us all in ASEAN. Having been ruled as part of India under the British Raj, it was finally separated and gained its independence in 1948 after a long campaign for independence led by Aung San, it became a military dictatorship in 1962 following a coup. This regime, known initially as the Burma Socialist Programme Party, then the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), ruled from that year until dissolved in 2011, and during its rule unfortunately, the people of Myanmar were denied democratic elections and suffered from the lack of numerous human rights, both political, such as denial of freedom of speech, and economic, such as the lack of a

conducive environment to grow its economy and provide for the welfare of its citizens. In 1988, following a popular uprising, the people of Myanmar were given hope when democratic elections returned the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the daughter of Aung San, Syuu Kyi in 1990. But most unfortunately the SPDC refused to recognise the results and instead continued to govern Myanmar for another 20 more years before dissolving in 2011 as part of Myanmar's roadmap to democracy. Although the NLD did not contest in the 2011 election, the recent 2015 election it did contest, and it won. Following this, I have learnt that although the current Myanmar Constitution bars Syuu Kyi, who is still leading the NLD, from the position of President, which is the head of the executive authority in Myanmar, negotiations are underway with the military of Myanmar to suspend the clause of the Constitution which disallows her from the post. This is indeed a positive development, and I welcome it wholeheartedly.

Yet while Myanmar has improved by leaps and bounds in the adoption and practice of democratic principles, it has to do more to achieve peace, which is necessary to ensure that Myanmar can build on its new status as a democracy and thrive thereon. Democracy, while desirable, in itself cannot ensure a prosperous and free society, for democracy always translates as rule of the majority. This leaves no room for the rights and interests of minorities. This is not an ideal state of affairs, in particular in societies where such minorities exist.

Peace is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a state in which there is no war or fighting. In order to achieve this state, there must be adequate protection of fundamental human rights, as enshrined in the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Of particular importance is the rights of racial and religious minorities in this declaration. This is implicit in Article 1, which states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Article 2 states that everyone is entitled to rights, regardless of racial or religious origin and Article 7 says that all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. Meanwhile, there is also the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Article 2 binds state parties to the ICERD to condemn racial discrimination and eliminate it in all its forms within those parties by engaging in no act or practice of racial discrimination against any persons, groups of persons or institutions. Further, Article 4 binds state parties to condemn all propaganda and all organizations which are based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin, or which attempt to justify or promote racial hatred and discrimination in any form and prohibit their spread by any means necessary.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I come from Malaysia, a well-known multi-racial country with a reputation for being a beacon of tolerance within the South East Asian region. Based on our own experience, the majority of us who are natives to Malaysia, the Malay people, had to accommodate the large number of Chinese and Indian immigrants brought in by our former colonial power Britain, over the 171 years of their rule over us. Recognising this, provision was made in the form of Article 153(1) of our Constitution which obligates the state to recognise the legitimate rights of the minorities alongside the special rights of the majority

Malays. Through this position, although we had one unfortunate black mark in our history in the form of race riots that occurred in 1969, race relations since then have been peaceful, and without incident. The government also does its best to inculcate openness by encouraging the celebration of the festivals of the different ethnic groups such as Chinese New Year and Eid by all races by advocating concepts such as the open house and adopting a policy of 1 Malaysia where the people are put first, and government services are delivered as speedily as possible.

This may be contrasted with the recent situation in Myanmar. As Myanmar has democratised, it is unfortunate that, as far as the Muslim Rohingya community is concerned, previous pockets of intolerance manifested towards them by the Burmese majority has erupted into full scale discrimination, which has occasionally snowballed into violence. The rights and dignity of the Rohingya are so much trampled upon by the Burmese state that their situation now is not unlike that of the Jews who faced internment at the Nazi extermination camp in Auschwitz, Poland in the 1940s. They are called illegal immigrants in Rakhine, stripped of their right to a nationality in 1982 and told to leave for Bangladesh, although they have settled in the areas they now inhabit for centuries prior, and just happen to be on the wrong side of the border separating India and Myanmar drawn up by the former colonial power, Britain. This situation is compounded by extremist rhetoric by Buddhist religious leaders of the Burmese majority in Myanmar, such as the 969 Movement led by Ashin Wirathu advocating boycotts of Rohingya owned businesses and advocating racist concepts such as the need to keep Rakhine state free of Muslim influence. In the face of all this, Aung San Syuu Kyi of the NLD maintains a deafening silence to this day, and this simply will not do. The

Myanmar authorities must stop the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar, restore their citizenship, and do all such acts necessary to shield compensate their loss and punish those responsible for exacerbating racial and religious tension, such as Ashin Wirathu and outlaw his racist 969 Movement. Rohingya Muslims must also be guaranteed the right to practice their Muslim faith freely in accordance with the UDHR and the ICERD. Then will the rights and dignity of Myanmar's religious Muslim minority, the Rohingya, be preserved, and peace will prevail alongside democracy, and ensure the prosperity of Myanmar.

Ladies and gentlemen, democracy is important and a welcome method of governance for it enables the citizenry to have a say in the manner they wish to be governed, in contrast with other forms of government that are tyrannical and do not benefit the people. But this democracy must be tempered with the safeguarding of the rights of the minority population, otherwise they would be oppressed by the actions of the majority.

With that I now proceed to the second part of my speech, which touches on the regional partnership between member states of Asia and in particular ASEAN towards realisation of the SDGs.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or officially, Transforming our World: the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development are an intergovernmental list of aspiration of 17 goals with 169 targets agreed on by

the UN Summit on Sustainable Development on 25-27 September 2015 in New York. These Goals, which are the successor to the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were supposed to be implemented between the years 2000 to 2015, were widely regarded as unsuccessful, and have been discredited. Common challenges facing humanity at the time such as poverty and global warming have morphed into bigger issues such as food scarcity and climate change. Ladies and gentlemen, youth leaders of tomorrow, let us ensure that these successor SDGs do not fail as well.

As agreed by the summit held on 25 September 2015, the 17 goals are poverty reduction, food security, health and general well-being, quality education, gender equality, sustainable management of water resources, access to affordable and reliable energy, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, building resilient infrastructure, reduction of inequality between countries, resilient and safe city living, sustainable consumption and production, action to combat climate change, conservation of marine resources, halting biodiversity loss, access to justice for all and the implementation of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Of particular note here, ladies and gentlemen, is the last goal, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. I did say earlier that I would speak in regional partnership towards the realisation of these SDGs. Hence this Global Partnership is very much relevant. As such I shall proceed to elaborate as to what it is, and what it should mean for us here in Asia.

The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development is conceived as ensuring a successful sustainable development agenda relying on partnerships between

governments, the private sector and civil society. These inclusive partnerships, it is hoped, will build upon principles and values shared by these various sectors and involve a shared vision, and shared goals that place the citizenry and our Earth at the centre. This must be realised at the global, regional, national and local level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

According to the UN, richer nations are pledging more than ever before towards assisting poorer nations towards achieving greater prosperity. The statistics show that official development assistance stood at \$135.2 billion in 2014, which is the highest level ever recorded in history. Further, thank due to increasing liberalisation at the WTO, 79% of the imports from developing countries enter developed countries duty-free and this is predicted to continue to soar with the recent conclusion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) in New Zealand recently, which is an agreement of free trade involving nations of the Pacific region, including my very own nation of Malaysia, who collectively account for 40% of global trade. This, in theory, is supposed to translate as better access to wealth for all. But somehow, this is hardly the case.

Connectivity between different persons and populations has also been made much easier. The number of Internet users in Africa almost doubled in the past four years and 30% of the world's youth are digital natives, which is defined as those who have been active online for at least five years. Yet out of a total world population of more than seven billion, more four billion people do not use the Internet, and 90% of them are from the developing world.

How are these challenges to be overcome? This is where the global, and in our case regional partnership, comes in. The partnership is multi-faceted, and encompasses four broad themes, namely finance, technology, capacity building and trade.

Financially, the goal is to improve a nation's domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection by strengthening resource mobilisation, mobilisation of additional resources from multiple sources, and for the poorer among us, the adoption and implementation of investment promotion regimes. Debt restructuring and debt release too, is crucial in ensuring that developing countries in particular attain long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies vide debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and addressing the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress. We are all too mindful of the situation Greece, for example, finds itself in with respect to its debts, and are anxious to avoid a similar predicament befalling our own respective economies.

On the technological front, we must enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations at the global level and through ASEAN at the regional level, through a global technology facilitation mechanism that enables the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms. Nations with technological prowess such as Israel, known to many as a start up nation,

and India, who has produced numerous outstanding alumni who are world renowned in their own right, such as the newly installed chief executive of Google, Sunder Pitchai, would do well to play their part and assist in this regard, particularly in the use of their clout in the augmentation of international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals.

Last but not least, we must enhance trade by a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization. There exists a pressing need to assist developing countries by significantly increasing their exports, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' share of global exports by the year 2020. Timely implementation of duty-free and quota-free market access on a lasting basis for all least developed countries, consistent with World Trade Organization decisions, including by ensuring that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple, and contribute to facilitating market access is also paramount.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having talked about what must be done, what have we here in Asia, done ourselves? What are the steps we have taken nationally and regionally to ensure that the Global and Partnership for Sustainable Development have been adequately implemented towards realising the SDGs? I will first elaborate as to the steps my own country, Malaysia has taken, before examining the

steps taken by ASEAN at the regional level, before opining on whether these are adequate to put us on the right track or more must be done.

It should be noted at this juncture that almost 20 years ago, in 1990, our then Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, envisioned something for Malaysia. He called this Vision 2020. Further, as provided for by Article 92 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the Malaysian Government sets out national development plans consistently spanning five year periods at a time. The latest iteration of this is the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, which will span the years 2016 to 2020 and is the last national development plan to take place before the year 2020.

The main thrusts of the Eleventh Malaysia Plan are six in number. Known as the Six Strategic Thrusts, they are inclusivity, the well-being of the citizenry, development of human capital, green growth, development of infrastructure and fostering innovation and increase of productivity.

In order to ensure these six thrusts achieve their goals, the Malaysian Government has also included certain principles to be applied in their implementation, known as game changers. These are unlocking the potential of productivity, translating innovation into wealth, increasing the percentage of the middle class, mainstreaming technical and vocational education and training, embarking on green growth and investing in competitive cities. Under this Plan, the Government aims to contain the rising cost of living by targeting the increase of the income of the bottom 40% of households from RM2,500.00 currently to RM5,000.00 by 2020, setting up initiatives such as low cost clinics, restaurants, convenience stores, and the like to ensure that no one gets left

behind. Regional economic development is to be implemented by five corridors, namely Iskandar Malaysia, the Sabah Development Corridor, the East Coast Economic Region, Northern Corridor Economic Region and the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy by attracting a total of 236 billion ringgit worth of investments and creating 470 thousand more jobs to complement the existing 307 billion worth of investment and 427 thousand jobs already created. Further, the Bumiputra Empowerment Agenda to further enhance the economic status of Malays and Bumiputras, who are a core part of Malaysia's existence as a nation, will seek to increase Bumiputra equity to the target of 30% as originally envisaged by our National Economic Policy.

For the regional level, ASEAN has, since the formulation and promulgation of its Charter in 2008, sought further integration along the lines of the European Union or the EU. It was the stated goal of ASEAN to ensure that Southeast Asia becomes a concert of nations which are outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity and playing a pivotal role in the international fora, and advancing ASEAN's common interests. To this end, the ASEAN Community project was launched consisting of the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and lastly, and most importantly, the ASEAN Economic Community.

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), in particular, is envisioned to be the realisation of ASEAN economic integration by 2015. The AEC Blueprint guides the establishment of the ASEAN Community, which came into existence last year.

Four pillars guide the formation of the AEC. The first envisions ASEAN as a single market and production base, one where goods, services, investments, and skilled labour are able to flow freely, and capital, freer, within the region. The second pillar, aims to form an economic region that is highly competitive. This is done by fostering a culture of fair competition; consumer protection; stimulating and promoting innovation; and providing regional public infrastructure through multimodal transport infrastructure linkages, connectivity and energy cooperation. The third pillar builds on the region's aspiration for an AEC that is inclusive and equitable. It focuses on efforts to support small and medium enterprises, as well as the newer ASEAN member states, to participate effectively and gainfully in the integration process. Finally, recognizing that ASEAN operates in an increasingly global environment, the fourth pillar focuses on developing and adopting a coherent approach towards external economic relations, and enhancing participation in global supply networks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I for one have been made to know that several initiatives have been undertaken to bring the region closer to the goals of the AEC 2015. The ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), in force since May 2010, has led to significant tariff elimination among ASEAN countries, and has contributed to the on-going efforts to address non-tariff measures in the region. The ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS), signed in 1995, has eased restrictions on cross border services trade in various sectors such as business services, construction, health care, maritime transport, telecommunications, tourism, and financial services. The ASEAN

Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA), which came into effect in March 2012, articulates member states' commitments in terms of liberalising and protecting cross-border investment activities while embracing international best practices in the treatment of foreign investors and investment.

There we have it, ladies and gentlemen: the various initiatives undertaken by the Government of my country, Malaysia as well as the collective governments of ASEAN member states. Having surveyed the same, is it safe to conclude that they accord with the Global Partnership on Sustainable Development, and thus realise the SDGs? I would venture to say half and half. While the initiatives of Malaysia are to be commended, they still retain a heavy focus on increase of trade and development of basic infrastructure, and increase of basic income, as opposed to the focus of the Global Partnership on tax collection efficiency, technological development, and the like. The AEC suffers from more or less the same deficiency. While barriers to trade have been lowered or removed, and market access has been made easier, in line with that envisaged by Goal 17 of the SDGs, there is a lack of policy on development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of technological know-how, and no blueprint on streamlining the processes involved in tax collection and other sources of revenue. To remedy this, perhaps the Malaysian Government, and ASEAN member states, would do well to revisit the Eleventh Malaysia Plan and AEC respectively, in order to incorporate and give due regard to the aims of the SDGs and synchronise the same so that harmonisation can occur.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen, youth leaders of tomorrow,

I now move to summarise my speech before concluding. I had shared with yourselves that democracy originated as a Western model of governance, but it is the best available, although it has an obvious weakness as it does not per se ensure that the rights of minorities are guaranteed in any given policy. In order to overcome this, due regard must be accorded to the human rights and dignity of the minorities, in particular racial and religious minorities. The example I had given in this regard was Myanmar, who, having emerged as a democratic nation recently, has failed to safeguard the lives and property of its ethnic Muslim Rohingya, who continue to suffer from institutionalised discrimination by the Burmese state and violent retribution by members of the Buddhist Rakhine majority. This must be put a stop to immediately to ensure that peace prevails.

Second, I had elaborated on the SDGs, in particular the last of them, that on Global Partnership on Sustainable Development. This particular goal is multifaceted and includes provision on finance, technology, capacity building and trade. I had observed that while Malaysia and ASEAN are moving along well on enhancing trade and developing infrastructure, there still remains a *lacuna* as far as policy on building on technological advancement and structuring finance are concerned. To this end, I have suggested that the architects of the Eleventh Malaysia Plan and the AEC revisit their aims thereunder accordingly, and ensure their synchronisation with the SDGs, so

that the same may be advanced to avoid the failure of their predecessor, the MDGs.

This concludes my speech, ladies and gentlemen and I wish you all well. Assalamualaikum wbt, thank you all for your time and good luck.

AZRIL MOHD AMIN