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MALAYSIA DEWAN RAKYAT SPEAKER LECTURE SERIES  
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Yang Berhormat Dato' Mohamad Ariff, Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat

Distinguished Guests,

Parliamentary Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I wish to express my thanks to Yang Berhormat Ariff for inviting me to visit Malaysia and to speak at this Dewan Rakyat Speaker Lecture Series. This is my first bilateral visit overseas as Speaker of Parliament. I am glad to have this opportunity to be here as Malaysia is not just Singapore's nearest neighbour, but also an important and close friend.

2 I wish to thank Yang Berhormat Ariff, the Malaysian Parliamentarians we have met and the Secretariat team at the Dewan Rakyat, for the warm hospitality we have enjoyed from the moment we arrived in vibrant Kuala Lumpur.

3 This morning we were warmly welcomed into the Chamber of the Dewan Rakyat. And then, through various meetings – formal and informal – we have been able to exchange honest and helpful views with various Malaysian Members of Parliament or MPs. We also met some Singaporeans who are working here in your lovely city. Many of them have found firm friends and built strong ties here. And without exception, they love your food! So, once again, thank you.

## **Singapore Parliamentary System – Evolution**

4 When Yang Berhormat Ariff wrote to me about this Lecture Series, he had recommended that I speak on the Singapore Parliamentary System.

5 Singapore and Malaysia have much in common – we share the same historical roots and a Westminster system of government. While we have some obvious differences such as in the Head of State, federal versus unitary systems of government, and bicameral versus unicameral House, we are more alike than we are different in our Parliamentary systems.

6 In both countries, Parliamentarians also share a common mission - to serve our respective peoples. Over the years, our Parliaments have evolved each in our own way, to meet local challenges and circumstances. In the next few minutes, allow me to share with you Singapore's perspective, on Parliament and some aspects of Governance, and on what we have done and are doing to address these challenges.

### **Representation and Political Stability**

7 Throughout history, societies have struggled with the central political problem of imposing order and unity across natural divisions. Not all political systems, even those that have instituted ethnic or gender quotas in their Parliaments, have been able to erase the lines of tribe, class, race or religion.

8 Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society. We have a first-past-the-post electoral system, which encourages clear electoral outcomes. We know that voters tend to elect as Members of Parliament or MPs those whom they identify with.

This is natural and understandable as a personal, micro-level decision. On a macro-level however, will we see this translate to a less than racially-balanced slate of candidates?

9 While we have progressed as a society, this is not something we take for granted. How do we ensure adequate representation, while maintaining political and social harmony? How do we assure minority communities that they will not be shut out or marginalised? That there are opportunities for alternative views to be heard and considered in Parliament?

10 To address these, Singapore's political system has developed additional features to checks and balances, ballasts and stabilisers.

#### GRC

11 Firstly, we guarantee adequate representation of minority communities in Parliament. Our electoral wards comprise both single-member constituencies (SMCs) and group representation constituencies (GRCs). Each GRC can have a team of 3 to 6 MPs, one of whom must be from a minority community. We have 13 SMCs and 16 GRCs. Minority communities are therefore guaranteed at least 16 constituency seats in Parliament.

#### NCMP

12 Secondly, we guarantee that the views of those who voted against the government and alternative views will be represented in Parliament. Political parties not forming the government were guaranteed a minimum number of 9 seats in the

Parliament, regardless of the result at the polls in a general election. For example, in the last general election, the opposition won 6 seats in Parliament. Another 3 opposition candidates were appointed as Non-constituency MPs or NCMPs. For the next GE, the number of NCMPs have been increased to 12.

### NMP

13 Third, we provide for a wider representation of non-partisan voices in the House through the Nominated Member of Parliament or NMP scheme. In 1990, we passed amendments to the Constitution to introduce the NMP scheme. NMPs do not contest in General Elections and they do not represent political parties. Instead, candidates for NMPs are nominated by professional bodies, and are interviewed and selected by a Special Select Committee made up of elected MPs. This Special Select Committee, which I chair, proposes the chosen candidates to the President of Singapore, and she appoints them. The term of an NMP is 2½, or half that of an elected MP, and under the Constitution, up to 9 NMPs may be appointed.

14 The NMP scheme has allowed a whole spectrum of interest groups to be heard in Parliament because NMPs have included representatives from the academia, the labour unions, the environment groups, the business groups, the professional and trade groups, the arts and cultural societies, and the sports associations. For example, Ms Anthea Ong, a Nominated Member in our delegation, is a passionate advocate for mental well-being and opportunities for differently-abled persons.

### Presidential Council for Minority Rights (PCMR)

15 Fourthly, we assure all racial and religious groups, that legislation will be scrutinised by an independent and non-partisan body: the Presidential Council for Minority Rights or PCMR. The PCMR makes a report to the Speaker stating whether there is any provision in a Bill which discriminates against or gives an unfair advantage to any racial or religious community.

### The President

16 Lastly, we have reserved elections for the office of the President to ensure that all communities will have the opportunity to be elected to the highest office of the land. The President has both a symbolic and custodial role. She represents Singaporeans from all walks of life. She also has custodial powers to ensure that government decisions to draw on the reserves and to appoint key public sector officials are made prudently.

### **Fiscal Prudence and Protection of the Reserves**

17 In the last general election in 2015, all 89 seats in Parliament were contested. In general, the political landscape in Singapore has been fairly stable which has allowed the government to implement long-term, sustainable policies and see them through from one term of Parliament to the next. The challenge is how to ensure that, going ahead, future governments do not deplete the reserves accumulated by previous governments. How do we prevent a future government from imprudently spending on populist and short-term policies?

18 Our solution was to entrench in the Constitution a two-key approach to unlocking the country's reserves. The first key is held by Parliament; the second, by the elected President. The budget is first approved by Parliament, and then it goes to the President, who has the discretion to grant or withhold her concurrence to a budget that seeks to draw on reserves accumulated by past governments. When the President exercises this discretion, she is assisted by the Council of Presidential Advisers.

19 We are also required under the Constitution to ensure that the Government keeps a balanced budget over each term of Government. What that means is that the Government cannot borrow money to fund expenditure. The Government Securities Act can allow borrowings but only if it is invested but not fund expenditure.

### **Political Allegiance and Stable Government**

20 Just like in other countries, the party which secures the majority of seats in Parliament forms the government in Singapore. At an election, a candidate campaigns under a party banner, endorses the party manifesto and rides on the popularity and success of the party he campaigns under. Voters, too, identify a candidate by his party and would choose the party to form the government.

21 So, how do we ensure that the mandate given by the voters remains stable until the next general election? How do we avoid a scenario of MPs "crossing the floor" – to use a Westminster Parliamentary phrase – and change political parties within the same term of Parliament? We know such developments cause uncertainties. So, in Singapore, the Constitution stipulates that if an elected MP

ceases to be a member of, is expelled from or resigns from the political party for which he stood in the election, he will lose his seat in Parliament.

### **Integrity and Trust**

22 The next challenge – one shared by many countries – the next challenge is how do we ensure political leadership remains capable and honest? How do we maintain high standards among politicians?

23 First, there is systematic leadership renewal. This is a key mission for every team of government leaders. We find and develop the next generation of political leaders and such leaders are tested in and out of Parliament to see how they make decisions, how they win the hearts and minds of the people. This helps to build capable leaders.

24 Second, our approach had been to pay our MPs and officeholders a clean wage. The salaries are pegged to marketplace comparables, but we apply a 40% discount to these salaries to arrive at the final figure for our officeholders. The discount reflects the ethos of sacrifice and public service. When we say we offer a clean wage, it means there are no hidden perks. For example, as office holders, we have the same medical benefits as our civil servants, no more, no less.

25 Next, it's widely reported that we emphasise zero tolerance for corruption in government and public agencies. As is the case in many countries, we have a Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) to look into and if need be,

investigate, complaints and suspicions of misconduct. Wrong-doers are prosecuted in a court of law.

26 The Auditor-General also conducts a rigorous audit of all public agencies to see if there are lapses in the adherence to government standards for procurement, for the management of IT systems and access rights, for project management, for administration of government grants and subsidies, and so on. The Auditor-General's findings are compiled in a report every year, and Ministries with lapses face questioning by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee or PAC. The PAC also publishes one report a year and this is made public. MPs frequently follow up with questions in Parliament on findings in both the PAC and the Auditor-General's reports.

### **Communication, Connection and Leveraging on Technology**

27 I have been sharing about the various structures and features that we have put in place to ensure stability, inclusiveness, a diversity of views and accountability in the governance of Singapore.

28 On the ground, we as MPs face the constant challenge of communicating and connecting effectively with our people. Governments and MPs do much to improve the lives of the people. But much is lost, if all the discussions and the decisions in Parliament are shrouded in inaccessible language.

29 We have a duty to demystify Parliamentary processes for our citizens. To help people understand the decisions and the laws we make that affect their lives. Being



open, informative and accessible will also help to counter the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation about our parliamentary debates and decisions.

30 Unfortunately, merely reading the Hansard reports of Parliamentary debates or watching hours of Parliamentary debates might not appeal to all young people. How, then, can Parliaments use technology and social media to better educate our citizens?

31 I hope to use these tools to help connect the dots between law-making and the public, to be a bridge between Singaporeans and Parliament.

32 Since going “live” in January last year, the Singapore Parliament’s first-ever official Facebook Page has sought to keep Singaporeans updated on what goes on in Parliament, with easy access to the Order Papers or the agenda for each Sitting, a list of MPs scheduled to speak each day and the Bills introduced at each Sitting. We have started to produce infographics to explain Parliamentary processes for staple events like the Budget and Committee of Supply debates, and the Opening of Parliament.

33 Last April, we also launched the Singapore Parliament Instagram to present a more light-hearted take on events in the House and as another way to stay connected with citizens both in Singapore and abroad.

34 I have my own personal and public Facebook page and since 2018, I have also been writing a regular Speaker’s blog to share my thoughts on Parliamentary

matters, such as the annual Committee of Supply process and debates. The public is not always familiar with Parliamentary processes so last year for example, we made a simple video with my mobile, explaining how we select topics filed by MPs for the Adjournment Motion speech in Singapore. The feedback has been positive. Ordinary Singaporeans have left comments to say they wanted to know more about Parliament and what goes on within the House. We need to do more.

35 And just like Malaysia Parliament, we are using technology in the Chamber to better deliver Secretariat services to MPs in Singapore. Since 2011, we have introduced the SG Parl App as an extension to our Parliament Website. The App allows a mobile-friendly version of our website to be displayed easily on our smart phones. This App is open to the public. I understand the Parliament of Malaysia has also recently launched an App. My heartiest congratulations.

36 In January this year, we went a step further. We soft launched a Sitting Day App for MPs. The Sitting Day App was developed with the key aim to reduce the use of hardcopy documents for Sittings. It's our "Go Green" initiative to reduce reliance on hardcopies. So, MPs can use their smart phones or tablets to log into the App and get hold of the Order Paper, the Bills introduced and being debated on, the daily list of MPs speaking for Bills or Motions or for the Committee of Supply. The App also allows us to quickly and conveniently notify MPs of Parliament-related matters such as suspension and adjournment of a Sitting, or the change in commencement time of a Sitting, through the "push notifications" function.

37 It is entirely conceivable that in the future, we can incorporate a more interactive component into this Sitting Day App for MPs. For instance, perhaps we can allow our MPs to use the App to file their Questions or indicate which Questions they wish to postpone or roll over to the next Sitting. But those are plans for the future.

### **Challenges Ahead for Parliaments**

38 As we contemplate the future, what lies in the road ahead for our Parliaments? We The Parliaments of Singapore and Malaysia share many common features. I think we also face many common challenges.

39 I mentioned earlier that our populations have become better educated, have more sources of news and information, and more sophisticated in their needs. The digital revolution has already triggered disruptions to our daily lives and changed the way information is disseminated and consumed by the masses. In addition, our societies are facing socio-economic challenges such as income inequality and the risk of political and religious polarisation.

40 Economically, industries that have not kept pace with the evolving landscape have either shut or are declining. This has threatened jobs and widened income gaps and threaten social cohesion.

41 In Singapore, we also face demographic challenges as we age and live longer whilst having lower birth rates. Our perennial challenges of being small and lacking natural resources continue to be part and parcel of our landscape.

42 However, these limitations have also been our opportunities because it forces us to innovate and to free ourselves from the constraints that can hold us in. As the world changes, we are presented with new possibilities to reshape our societies and economies to make the lives of our constituents better.

43 In a 1965 speech, Singapore's first Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew had painted a bold vision of transforming Singapore from mud-flats to a metropolis. Today, Singapore is indeed a metropolis but keeping it thriving means tackling the kinds of issues advancing economies grapple with.

44 Even as we endeavour to address these issues, managing expectations will be a significant challenge as newer generations of Singaporeans expect the high bar set in many areas to be a norm and desire for it to be met and surpassed.

### **Forging Social Compact with the People for Today and Tomorrow**

45 Such initiatives are part of the Singapore government's social compact to improve citizens' lives.

46 I mention this forging of a social compact as I think we can all agree that the challenge for any country's government, be it Singapore or Malaysia, is to convince our people of the viability of our masterplans and blue prints for the way forward. As parliamentarians, we are all too familiar with the conundrum that what is ideal for the individual is not always optimal for the nation as a whole.

47 We therefore have to explain difficult choices and balancing of trade-offs in the here and now. We need to engage our constituents to give them the nation's sense of perspective and a sense of reality, to provide the context within which difficult choices are made so that our nations remain relevant in a changing world.

### **Parliament As a Beacon of Trust**

48 To this end, Parliament needs to be a beacon which citizens can look to with confidence and know that issues of significance to the nation's collective well-being, are addressed. To do this well, we need to constantly engage and reinforce the public's trust and respect for Parliament as an institution. Only then will we have the space and mandate to chart the way forward. This is our business and remains the order of the day in a changing world.

### **ASEAN Remains Key**

49 I also mentioned that we face common challenges in our external environment. As trade-dependent countries, we look with concern as the US and China work out their differences, and hope that they will find a new modus vivendi wherein smaller trading nations can thrive.

50 We are also faced with growing global protectionism that threatens the established rules-based multilateral trading system that has underpinned the success of both our countries for so many years.

51 Against this backdrop, ASEAN has become more important for both our countries in today's global environment. Collectively, ASEAN, with a population of

636 million people, is the sixth largest economy in the world. When ASEAN speaks as one, it allows us to be heard by the superpowers despite our small size.

52 The leaders of both our countries have long recognised the advantage ASEAN gives us and have made ASEAN a cornerstone of our foreign policies and for our engagement with the rest of the world.

53 As ASEAN's two most developed economies, Singapore and Malaysia stand to gain a lot from a united and successful ASEAN. It is in both our countries' interests to strengthen the open and inclusive ASEAN-centric regional architecture to ensure that our region remains at the centre of a fast developing Asia.

### **Bilateral Relations**

54 Which brings me to our friendship. Singapore and Malaysia are conjoined by history and ties of family. My mother was from Kuantan and I remember frequent visits there when I was a boy – going on the rickety ferry with cars perched right to the edge. Today, the ferry ride and Kuantan have all been transformed. Malaysia and Singapore have both seen incredible changes within one lifetime, as we have industrialised, harnessed technologies, and improved the quality of life of our peoples. Much of this is due to the fact that our two countries worked together along the journey. We have a long history together, our relationship underpinned by close familial, cultural and business ties.

55 On many levels, we *are* as close as family, and as family, there will inevitably be disagreements and issues that crop up from time to time. These need to be

managed carefully in order to find win-win solutions for both countries. It serves both Singapore and Malaysia's interest for us to maintain an overall stable and positive bilateral relationship.

56 As parliamentarians, we can do our part by having more bilateral exchanges to build areas of mutual interest. We can work together to encourage our constituents to interact with the other side to build a better understanding of each other's socio-economic challenges and way of life. For example, Singaporeans should learn more about Malaysia. We should explore beyond Johor and Kuala Lumpur and understand that Malaysia is much more than these two cities. Kuantan is at least for me, an unparalleled jewel of a destination.

57 At the regional level, our Parliaments can also work together, for example at the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly or AIPA, to push our common agenda.

## **Conclusion**

58 In summary, our countries face similar challenges, especially in this time of global economic uncertainty. But there is more that binds us together than keeps us apart.

59 I made this visit to Kuala Lumpur to strengthen the cooperation and understanding between both our Parliaments. I hope this is just a first step forward and we can continue to develop the friendships we have built between our Parliaments and work together to improve the lives of our people.

Thank you.