

Bismillahirrahmannirrahim, Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, and a very good morning.

My dear friends, I am truly happy and honoured to be with you today and feel greatly touched by the warm and vibrant welcome I received earlier. It makes me so glad and happy that I made this decision to attend and to participate in this special conference and to witness the momentum that is being generated in raising the voices of the moderate silent majority. Thank you.

I was first approached some time last year by the President and Vice President of Harmoni Malaysia to launch this new association and to deliver the keynote address at this first conference of theirs. To be frank, I was at first hesitant to be involved because my other commitments, but the noble objects for which the association was formed struck a chord with the emerging sentiments of the times in the national landscape. It was time for the voices of moderation and reason to be aired. It was time for us to be more aggressive in promoting better understanding and harmonious living amongst our people. It was time to make a stand and I accepted the invitation to be the advisor of the association and to be here with you today.

2. If we are to ask a simple question such as what do people want out of life, we will be surprised to find the answer, even though it varies, it can be scrutinised and simply deduced to be HAPPY. Yes, people just want to be happy, being happy will make their life successful and meaningful, and in all that they do, they hope to achieve it and get to enjoy their life. However, the attributes, magnitude and measure of success and happiness is again subjected to various interpretations, and is very personal in nature.

3. Studies in the subject matter in the early part of the modern civilisation, identified and centred around the economic prominence as being the measure of success and happiness. This is the reason why a lot of efforts to improve the quality of life were focussed around the economic initiatives and how it is being improved, was taken as “the” indicator of success. As a result, income per capita and or GDP of a country are taken as the default indicator to represent the level of success.

4. Happiness, on the other hand is not being treated with the same degree of importance and often taken as a direct incident of success. If we are successful, we are wealthy, economically

powerful and therefore deemed to be happy. However, if happiness was to be given the same treatment, perhaps the equation is the opposite. A content, just, and simple but responsible life may lead to happiness and therefore, successful.

5. Without doubt, there are sectors of the world society, who holds dearly to the concept of happiness that does not tie entirely to the concept of economic power. People who live their life religiously tends to be more inclined towards this thinking. They maybe poor, but does not mean that they are not happy. As a matter of fact some in this situation even think that they are happier than some of the wealthy people.

6. According to them, their happiness is more profound, divine and lasting compared to the wealthy who are deemed to be temporary and could well be pseudo-happy. These groups existed then and today, but in the macro or world perspectives, they always represent the minority. Regardless, and with all the subjectivity in it, the standard measurement for success hinges around the economic strength that one has attained.

7. In light of the vast changes in the society, human well-being, environment and the global economy, many sectors have questioned the adequacy of such measurement.

8. GDP for a country may be shown to be increasing and give the impression of an economic progress. However, other figures such as unemployment may reveal a different story, which amounts to a mismatch, a disparity that reduces the utility of GDP as a measure of well-being. A case in point, a country may report growth in GDP while poverty and unemployment grow unabated. In simpler terms, the economic figures depict a happy and successful community but are not so in reality. There are other arguments to support these flaws and as a result, most of them agree that GDP, while functioning as an economic indicator, does not address the quality of life and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

9. The scrutiny paved for more creativity in the approach to measure success. While GDP or economic strength is still important, other measures are developed as supplements. These last decades saw a certain degree of prominence given to the other criteria which is non-economic as measure of success. They include the Human Development Index created by the UNDP and gender equity index as advocated by the EU.

10. Amartya Sen (1999) in his work contrasts the remarkable economic progress and wealth created in the last century to the devastating deprivation, destitution and oppression suffered by billions of people worldwide. He went on to call for a shift in the economic focus, moving from expansion to the integrative framework improving individual lives which will lead to the concept of human wellbeing and concept of sustainable economic growth.

11. Ladies and gentlemen, for the purpose of Malaysia, I am of the opinion that we only look at perhaps three of the pertinent indicators as basis to move towards greater success and harmony. They are; (1) Income, (2) relationship between citizens vis-a-vis ethnic relations and religion, and (3) politics. I personally think that these three are most significant and relevant to us at the moment.

12. This is also in line with the arguments put forth by several groups, especially NGOs who existed to contribute and address the issue of inequality and harmony in Malaysia. 'Harmony Malaysia', for instance was launched in October 2013 focuses on peaceful living and harmony in respect of race and religion. Their explicit aim was to foster brotherhood amongst Malaysians and increase humanity within all without regard to race or faith.

13. Likewise, a study undertaken by a team of researchers from IIUM, appreciated the diversity of the country and highlighted the embodiment of racial relation as being the fundamental parameters for harmony in Malaysia. That being the case, they went on to identify how political, economic and social well-being as the main factors that determine the outcome of racial relation, whether it unites or further divide. They also went on to put forth the issue of education as a vital intervention approach to better influence this united or divided outcome.

14. Based on these facts and also my observation over these years, I am of the opinion that even though there are many factors that determine harmony and success, we should just focus on the three elements that I mentioned; i.e., economy, (wealth or income), race relation and religion, and politics for Malaysia.

15. 12 years into the independence of Malaya and exactly on 13th May, 1969, with all the tension that builds up, all hell broke loose. We tragically fought against one another, peace and harmony amongst citizens especially relationship between ethnic groups were disturbed, having a lasting effect until today. The tolerance that binds and serves as a foundation prior to independence were compromised and shattered. We instead allowed mutiny, greed and emotions and sentiments to take prominence which led to the episode that will forever haunt us

and brought about risk for the peace and harmony that all of us so cherish.

16. As of now, we may say with relief that we are successful in our effort to prevent any repeat of the tragedy. However, if we scrutinise further and look at it in the philosophical perspectives, the 'spirit' of May 1969 occurs every now and then, and if I may add, rampantly. It may not be in the form of physical conflict but more so at the psychological and mind-set level and this can be seen in the level of distrust that exists between us. At this juncture, perhaps it is timely for me to ask every one of us present here today to take stock, evaluate or muhasabah and strengthen our purpose and desire to resolve this problem and put us and our future in better light. Let us not join the group who are in denial and ridicule the threat, nor the group that for reasons known to them, actively and continuously act to disrupt this fragile cohesion that exist.

17. Having said that, we have to record that since May 1969, there has not been any major ethnic conflicts and this should give us some form of relief. To a certain extent, we can think and assume that what we are doing up until now is correct. However, as with my advice in previous other occasions, we should not be complacent and let our guards down. With the ugly 'spirit' that surfaces every now and then, we must always strive to maintain order and enhance understanding between ethnic groups, and propagate peace and harmony in the country.

18. Of late, I am quite disturbed with the turn of events that unfolds before us. The heat and tensions rose to a level which are unprecedented and if left unchecked could snowball into something catastrophic making it difficult to rectify and recover. Based on my observations, we can point to two major issues as the source of unhappiness and tension. The first evolved around the issue of inequality in wealth, mostly between the have and the have not (rich and poor) transgressing the racial divide. The other is in the socio-cultural and religion issues which touch on the rights of a certain group and is more centred around the issue between ethnic groups.

19. On the economic stance, we have to admit that quite a big portion of our society is feeling the economic crunch and hardship. The income obtained in some circumstances is just not enough to make ends meet. And by this, we mean the basic requirement to live a decent life. The evidence of these are aplenty and the fact that people do multiple jobs is a testimony of that. Looking at it from a bigger perspective, you couldn't help but feel sorry for them. They are economically weak, they don't get to enjoy a decent quality of life and that being the case can they be happy and satisfied? If I may ask.

20. As far as the issue of economics and wealth are concerned, these two factors are critical and detrimental to the harmony in the country. Firstly, the fact that some sectors of the society are just poor, they don't have enough, they have to do multiple jobs to make ends meet. Secondly, the economic inequality that exist in society as demonstrated by our GNI Index, provided reason for animosity between the have and the have not, propelled even further by the existence of the so called unexplained wealth of some members of the community. With these two underlying factors, it could cause ill feelings and animosity towards the rich, and if not addressed, may break and disrupt the peace and harmony of the country.

21. Ethnic relations and religion can be grouped together since the relevancy of the issue is not so much between the so many ethnic groups that exist, but rather between the two broad group. Bumiputras, which is predominantly Malay and Muslim and non-bumiputra, which is predominantly non-Muslim comprising of all other major ethnic groups.

22. The spirit and soul of our multi-ethnic Malaysia is well enshrined in the constitution and rukun negara. Our fore fathers fighting for independence recognised this social landscape and thus, the provision for a harmonious co-existence was enacted. There are several Articles in the constitution that explicitly address the issue, remain relevant till now, and to my mind, struck a balance for all of us. It has proven to be workable, appropriate and fostered respect between us. There were then, isolated cases challenging it, but I reckon, were properly managed, to prevent it from escalating. However, in these last years, we have witnessed too many incidents that strike at the balance and became worse because of these two factors. The first, I think is when narrow-minded people with specific interests are allowed to exploit the situation for their prominence and personal agenda. It would have not been too easy then, but with the powers that be becoming too powerful, this is now a threat. The second is, to my mind, attributed by the advent of information and media communication channels. Society became more informed albeit the right and the wrong giving rise to perceptions that prejudiced the understanding and harmony.

23. Gone were the days when every little boy in the kampong irrespective of race, running around with a racket in hand claiming to be Wong Peng Soon. Personally, I remember my Chinese and Indian friends well and trust was never an issue. However, I am sorry to say that the same cannot be said of the situation today. Nowadays, even business partners who existed for mutual goals do not trust one another. Our societies are being exploited by extreme individuals and groups and it became very polarised because of race and religion, and I have to say, that it is not good.

24. Ladies and gentlemen, the last variable; politics, is perhaps the most critical and is of great

relevance now. The unhappiness stems as a result of the perceived from what is as unfair and unjust practices of the system especially by those in power and is resented by all sectors, regardless of race, ideology and creed. The situation is bad because even members of the ruling party felt misled and cheated.

25. We must always remember the 1969 episode so that it would continue to remind us. Yes, it was the result of several factors, which include amongst others the state of the race relations and economy. More importantly the fact these reasons were caused by the political dysfunction due to excesses, triggering the unfortunate bloodshed.

26. Ladies and gentlemen, I could go on and on and harp on all these shortcomings, but I guess it is sufficient to illustrate the landscape that we are in now. They are not that good and therefore we should focus on the future; what we ought to do to rectify and make it better. Remember, we don't want our sons and daughters to curse us (especially after we are gone) because we left them a world which is so messy, unjust and unsustainable.

27. Moving forward, allow me to put forth my thoughts in the hope that we all who are present can ponder on it and chart the way forward for a more harmonious Malaysia. The unity amongst us all, especially the three major ethnic groups are paramount because it serves as the foundation for a harmonious life relative to the issue of economy and politics.

28. With regards to the economy, the way forward should be directed to address two main objectives. Firstly, efforts should be focussed raising the real income level of the people so that the minimum wage established is a fair threshold that enables people to lead a decent life. The second is to push for a transparent and equitable system where the distribution of wealth would be acceptable, deemed just and fair.

29. On the issue of transparency and equitable distribution of wealth, we need a strong political will to correct what is wrong in our system. I hate to say it, but it is very disturbing to see that we have regressed. In education, for example, we are ranked below Vietnam and Philippines whose GDP is lower than ours. In the corruption index, we are slipping down the rank.

30. Economically, we have produced some results, but I don't know if it is enough for us to claim success. The issue is relative. The ringgit at one time was at par with the Singapore

dollar, but today it has gone down more than 40%. Our GDP in the 70s was better than that of South Korea, but today they have surpassed us. I can go on and on, but I think we have got the message.

31. Perhaps the way forward for Malaysia as far as politics goes, is a change in the system of government. Not change for the sake of change, but change for the better. We ought to explore the various systems of government that exist, and see if we as a nation can perform better with a different system. Yes, we inherit the current system from the British and this very system has proven to be effective in some countries. The same cannot be said for Malaysia. Maybe the make-up, culture and characteristic of our society, inhibits the efficiency and effectiveness of such a system. The very fundamental aspect of governance advocates separation of powers between the three arms of the government; judiciary, legislative and executive. However, if we ask the man in the street today, majority will not agree that this separation exists. All seemed to be vested in the executive. The executive is just too powerful that it dominates the other two arms of the government.

32. The other thing that comes to mind is the party system which race based. I honestly think that it inhibits unity and harmony and maybe the way forward is to have an open system and not race or religion based.

33. The way forward in this respect is to ensure national unity which is the responsibility of each and every Malaysian. It is the pre-requisite for a continued peace, stability and well-being of a harmonious Malaysia. Several approaches may be taken but the focus should be towards increasing understanding between races, appreciating and respecting each cultural and religious rights. Education is key to building racial unity and we have to really improve our initiatives to address them.

34. In this context, suggestions should include:

a. educational programs and teachers training at all levels, from school to universities are to be directed towards national unity.

b. integration of students of various race in co-curricular activities and associations are to be encouraged

c. teaching of universal values and local traditions of various race are to be enhanced. People should be aware and understand the similarities and differences in the culture, traditions, beliefs and practices of various communities in Malaysia.

d. reduce and reject the existence of race-based association in schools and colleges

e. unity clubs in schools and colleges should be established to encourage interaction and foster unity amongst students. Activities in the form of work camps, unity gatherings, sports and the like are to be encouraged to enhance integration and unity.

f. the approach will hopefully shift one from being a narrow-minded person to an open-minded person which liberates the spirit of an individual from any form of prejudice or ill-will.

35. What is the situation in respect of our student-citizens, the undergraduates in the public universities where the majority are Malays and the private universities which are mostly non-Malays? We have 16 public universities and 43 private universities. The students in the public universities are Malays. Those in the 43 private universities are mostly non-Malays.

36. In the World Bank Report 2014 we had a combined graduates of 220,527 graduates in 2012, of which 25.6% had not secured a job within 6 months of their graduation. The latest Labour Force Survey released in June 2014 revealed that 31% of the unemployed were graduates. Most of the unemployed are Malays from the public universities. These statistics only reflect that which we can count. It does not record the social and human impact it has on the students who cannot get employment.

37. Even those who have found employment are weighed down by the quality of education they received and the income that goes with it. Indebtedness among them is high.

38. These are visible structural problems. But there is a deeper and more difficult cause for the low level of educational competence which is less visible. These are qualities of leadership in

education and human resources that are needed to bring out the best in the students. They are not issues which can be reduced as statistics, nor are they easy to discuss as they involve hard structural issues, policies, and the human and intellectual agencies.

39. There is a lot to think about the future in terms of the consequences of mediocre universities and the cumulative number of students they produce in creating new problems of economic and social inequality. There are serious economic and political consequences that need to be considered. It can result in deep undercurrents of racial inequality which can have unpredictable consequences.

40. We have been told that our economy has had a growth rate of an average of 8% in the past. But the reality is this growth had no benefit the majority of the graduates of the public universities. In fact, it has by-passed most of them. Neither has the past growth rate reduced the racial divide, particularly among the Malay graduates. In fact, for whatever reasons, the idea that the economy's prosperity will diminish racial differences has not been born out. This is largely because the growth that is recorded is about financial transactions and profit rate. It has nothing to do with opportunities for our graduates from public universities.

41. When they are employed, they are paid an income that does not commensurate with their work or as living wages. Very often, they come out of universities with the debt trap, from which they are unable to get out.

42. The importance of focusing on the divide in the tertiary education is because the student-citizens of universities are our future hope, and if our universities fail to create the kind of student-citizens that will take the responsibilities of citizens and influence the cause of events in a responsible way, then whatever the status of the economy and whatever we achieve in economic growth will eventually fail.

43. In fact, the state of the quality of education in the tertiary sector of the public universities in many ways does not reflect the needs of economic achievements in terms of growth. I will further state, economic growth cannot be sustainable if the products of our tertiary education, particularly in the public university sector, do not match with the private universities.

44. It is generally accepted as a fact that the graduates from the public universities find it very

difficult to get employment, as opposed to those from private universities. Unemployment among graduates from public universities is disproportionately high. This inequality is alarming and potentially not only can become a social and economic problem but also a political problem. When times are hard and you have a large portion of our graduates from a particular sector unemployed, there are implications.

45. Therefore, it is my firm belief that there is an urgency to examine what are the underlying causes for this inequality and address them honestly and courageously.

46. This is not a problem that has arisen recently. It is a build-up of policies and leadership questions that decided the direction in which education should take place. There is not enough thought and open discussion, free of political prejudices, in order for us, first of all, to measure the extent of the problem and to know what is the underlying causes of the problem, and, most importantly of course, the courage to make the necessary changes.

47. Any discussion on this matter is bound to create unhappiness because there is a sector in our public life that wants to give the impression that there are no such problems. There is a tendency of escapism from the realities and consequences of past policies. We cannot be our worst enemies and we will be such if we do not have a frank, honest and courageous discussion as to how to solve the problems.

48. Ultimately, the quality of students and graduates we produce depends on the political leadership we have in our country, who at the moment play a very significant role in shaping the tertiary educational policies.

49. Historically, one of the main concerns of the Malay leadership was the unequal representation of Malays in tertiary education. That concern has now come back to us in a different way and that is the inequality of the quality of education between those who go to public universities and those who go to private universities. Therefore, it is possible for me to say that our immediate concerns after Independence about producing a racial balance in tertiary education has now come back to haunt us in a different way.

50. I am not saying I have a solution for these problems. I am posing a very difficult question for us to think together. It is important for us to realize that good policies do not come about

accidentally. Good policies cannot come out unless you have the right leadership, and by right leadership I mean leadership who are not obsessed about enrichment, obsessed about money, and obsessed about wealth. There must be a genuine concern and understanding that the future of Malaysia will depend on the quality of students we produce from the public universities.

51. I leave you all with the challenge that this problem poses and for you to think how it can be rectified. We have reached a turning point in our nation's march to modernize our people. If we do not now take stock of the extent of the problem and face the challenge, no amount of economic prosperity or growth can solve this problem.

52. Before I conclude, I want to remind all of you that if the quality of the product of our tertiary education is unequal, then the opportunities that come with economic growth will be unevenly distributed.

53. The question that arises is what is the relevance of this social problem with racial harmony? It is a fact that racial disharmony is the product of unequal societies or unjust societies and where the remedies for this inequality or injustice fester without remedy. The student population, in any society, is a very sensitive, idealistic and potentially volatile group of student-citizens. I am using the words "student-citizens" in a specific way to mean that those who graduate from universities are usually of voting age and on the threshold of coming into the society to seek a living on their own with a sense of self-worth and pride. If they cannot find their place under the Malaysian sun, a status of worth and employment with a possibility of a basic fulfillment of adult life where he's independent, capable of raising a family and having a home, if these are not possible and it is perceived as discriminatory, either intended or consequential of bad policies, then we face a potentially serious problem of stability and harmony.

54. The same initiatives could also be taken to involve adults and the rest of the community. Government agencies and perhaps the private sector through their CSR initiatives could undertake specific programs and activities that will enhance interaction and foster unity amongst citizens.

55. When our beloved father of independence Almarhum Tunku Abdul Rahman founded Malaysia, he talked of the different races as part of one big happy family. He said, something to the effect that "If we really want to come together as a family and live under one roof called Malaysia, we must be sincere with one another – Malay, Chinese, Indian, Dayak, Kadazan,

Siamese and others – Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, etc. If we are sincere, then we cannot say anything that will hurt one another. We cannot also do anything that will hurt each other. As sincere members of one family, we must always be there to help one another. The rich must help the poor and the successful must help the unfortunate. Only then can we be one people and a country that is united and strong. Everyone will be happy. Only then will Malaysia be respected by the world.....”

56. What powerful words of simplicity and wisdom. He intended for us to live in this manner as one big happy family. After 57 years, where are we? Are we already living as one big family? As I have said, if we are not, then something must be very wrong! We cannot wait any longer for us to take our country back on course. We must do something and do it now!! Every right-thinking Malaysian must make their voices heard and it must be loud and clear.

57. Likewise, the religious approach should also be utilised since all major religions that exist in Malaysia advocate peace and demand responsibility from their followers. In short, if someone regardless of faith, strictly adhere to the teachings of their religion, he will protect and defend the rights of all people to truth, justice and peace. The actions will promote goodwill, spirit of charity, humanitarian and harmonious living amongst all people and respect towards each other's culture and faith.

58. In Islam the provision as to the manner to deal with differences are prescribed in Surah Mumtahanah, Verse 8. In the verse, ALLAH SWT loves those who act justly and kindly towards people of different beliefs. This is further strengthened by Verse 13, Surah Al-Hujurat which advocated that the righteousness in dealing with different people are deemed noble in the eyes of ALLAH SWT.

59. From the words of one scholar, “..true persons of religion understands well their social obligations and responsibilities to one and all. It serves as part of their religious responsibility of which they will be accountable to, and this make them disciplined, and responsible to the well-being of the society”.

60. Based on these findings, I must say that our religious gurus, regardless of religion, have to work harder. They must make it a point to instil sense of responsibility, respect and understanding of other religion and when this happens, it speaks well of national unity.

61. Ladies and gentlemen, what we need most now is perhaps race bridge builders instead of racial heroes, to neutralise the politics of hatred, racial polarisation and racial exclusiveness which seems to be on the rise. These will promote an environment where Malaysian engage with one another, to discourse and debate, answer queries and address criticism with factual and justifiable explanations. In this manner we shall build a society that is steeped in noble values, knowledgeable, and with a sense of self-worth, rooted in unity and understanding which serves as a recipe for peace and harmony.

62. The current norms of acknowledging and respecting people because of wealth should be shifted towards righteousness, noble and a sense of responsibility in their undertakings. We are what we make it to be, so we must all take stock, realign and stay committed to do whatever is necessary to enhance happiness of all, making it possible for us to enjoy continued peace and harmony.

Thank you very much for your attention and good luck to us all.

Keynote Address at The Harmony Conference On Saturday, 30.5.15 At 9.00 A.M. At IAIS,  
Jalan Ilmu, Off Jalan Universiti, Petaling Jaya