

Assalamu'alaikum, salam sejahtera and good evening to:

Our keynote speaker Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz,

Sasterawan negara Professor Dr Muhammad Haji Salleh,

Tan Sris, Puan Sris, Dato's, Datins,

Members of the families of our founding fathers,

Members of Parliament,

The IDEAS family including our past CEO Wan Saiful and present CEO Dr Tricia,

Colleagues from my other organisations and other sponsors and supporters,

My friends from the Astra Band,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's such a privilege to be welcoming you to IDEAS' 12th Anniversary Dinner. For obvious reasons we could not have one last year, and even this one has been twice postponed because of the uncertainties of hosting events during Covid. Normally we would be celebrating our anniversary and the birthday of Bapa Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman in February. And as mentioned, we are of course sorry to not have the presence of Tunku Khadijah, who was always supportive of our work.

But, as we approach Merdeka and Malaysia Days, and as the nation has seen a most significant event of constitutional and political significance earlier this week, perhaps this is an appropriate time to talk about "moving forward together" as a nation.

Or perhaps not. Days after our tenth anniversary dinner at which the then Deputy Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr Wan Azizah was the keynote speaker, the government fell in the Sheraton Move. Who knows what will happen next week, given the daily reports of pressure being put to bear for certain interventions and the calling of a general election? As exciting as that may be, tonight I want to recall the challenges and achievements of the last two years.

Obviously Covid-19 had a huge impact on us, first of all with staff members themselves being infected and losing loved ones. The manner of working had to change, and much of our research and advocacy inevitably took on a Covid angle: for example, how to help marginalised communities during the pandemic, or how to help SMEs recover after it. Dr Tricia will explain our activities in greater detail later,

but I am extremely proud that since 2020 we have released 46 publications, held 51 public events (albeit many online) and maintained six dedicated websites associated with our projects.

But I am also extremely proud of the contribution that IDEAS made in helping frontliners in hospitals with equipment and supplies. Many of you will recall the heart-wrenching video that went viral, where doctors and nurses were lamenting that people were dying due to a lack of equipment, and yet they weren't themselves allowed to appeal to the public to get what was needed, due to archaic rules governing civil servants, which of course medical professionals in public hospitals are. So by communicating with them discreetly, we were able to donate such equipment with contributions of over RM2 million from Malaysians. This was just one small manifestation of Malaysians coming together in times of adversity to help their fellow citizens during the pandemic. Another one was seeing how citizens, corporations and SMEs quickly cooperated using the power of technology and social media to ensure that supply chains - particularly for food and medicines - remained intact during the Movement Control Orders so that orphanages and welfare homes could continue to provide care. We saw this again during the floods last December.

I am also pleased that IDEAS Autism Centre has managed to grow despite the pandemic, with our second centre opening in Nilai earlier this year, and more centres or partnerships with other centres set to continue under the amazing leadership of Puan Sharifah. Already, three Memoranda of Understanding have been signed with nearby universities to boost the provision of services but also to carry out much needed research in the field of autism.

But my main interest in co-founding IDEAS twelve years ago has always been in the improvement of our democracy. In using the inspiration and examples set by Tunku Abdul Rahman and that generation of principled and dedicated - though not faultless - leaders to inspire change today. Change which, of course, is consistent with the spirit of Merdeka, Malaysian unity, our Federal Constitution and our Rukun Negara.

And as we have seen, the accidental political constellation of weaker parties and unpredictable coalitions has meant that some important reforms have been achieved. Undi 18 and automatic voter registration were of course in the government's manifesto, but the anti-hopping law has been achieved because even politicians are aware that public faith in them is at an all-time low. It is actually in their own interest to be forced to be loyal. They don't have to hedge as to which leader they want to receive a bribe from.

Recently we have seen the government's commitment towards political finance reform, where IDEAS is heavily involved as secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group of Political Financing. The very existence of an APPG is itself a significant

reform, accompanying the Parliamentary Select Committees that were promised in the manifesto. And now, even term limits for the Prime Minister are being discussed.

These five things - Undi 18, automatic voter registration, anti-hopping, political financing and term limits - are all profound reforms that will improve the quality of our democracy moving forward. There are of course many more things that we at IDEAS, alongside civil society friends and yes, competitors, want to see, but the important thing now is that such processes are becoming normalised. Civil society is here to stay, closing the gap between electors and the elected, and enriching the time between elections so that issues of public policy remain live, always debated and discussed so that citizens get the best possible outcomes.

As for tonight, congratulations to the team. Because of the pandemic I have hardly been in the office at all, and indeed our staff go in on rotation anyway. As a result, there are many team members I am only meeting for the first time today. But the camaraderie I saw during the rehearsals is consistent with the enthusiasm and passion that has always defined IDEAS since our very earliest days, when me, Wan Saiful and Wan Mohd Firdaus conspired in my flat in London. I hope that this spirit continues, even if circumstances and national challenges evolve.

Thank you all very much for supporting our endeavours.

Wabilahi taufiq walhidayah and wassalamu'alaikum.