

OPENING REMARKS BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM FOR SYED HUSSEIN ALATAS INAUGURAL MEMORIAL LECTURE “THE MALAYS IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS ASEAN: PROTECTING IDENTITY; UPHOLDING INTEGRITY” ON 12th MAY 2018

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Department staff and alumni

Ladies and gentlemen

I am pleased to be here to commemorate the inaugural Syed Hussein Alatas Memorial Lecture in conjunction with the NUS Malay Studies Department 50th anniversary.

2 The late Prof Syed Hussein Alatas started the Department of Malay Studies and became its first head of department, a position he held for many years until 1987. He played a pivotal role in building the foundations of the department and inspired the scholarly study of the Malay World in areas of identity, politics, religion and culture. The Malay Studies Department has grown from strength to strength and today, I am honoured to grace this inaugural lecture.

3 Personally, I have fond memories of Prof Alatas. Although I studied engineering in NUS, he welcomed my friends and I to his home to discuss issues that mattered to us. I am fortunate to be given the privilege of entering his world and understanding his ideas. His generosity in sharing helped us better appreciate the world of ideas and see the world more clearly. His ideas and passion served to inspire all those around him to continue his struggle and endeavour to make this world a better place.

4 I am certain that this memorial lecture will offer us a platform to reflect on his vast contributions. I hope that it will also inspire us to emulate his ideals and actions. Allow me to share three valuable insights of Prof Alatas.

Progressive religious discourse

5 First, Prof Alatas envisioned the need to shape a progressive religious discourse for the Singapore Malay/Muslim community. Through his many writings on religion and development, Prof Alatas focused on fostering a **thinking** public. Prof Alatas wanted the community to progress in tandem with modernity, while being anchored in its religious tradition.

6 One example of his passionate belief in the relevance of Islam to the modern age can be seen in his approach to the organ donation debate in the 1970s. He disagreed with the fatwa of 1973 as it disallowed procedures that could potentially improve the welfare of the sick and disabled. Significantly, he offered a rational response to the debate which drew on fundamental sources of the Quran and Hadith. He aimed to show that Islam is a progressive religion, applicable across cultures, and that was relevant to the issues of our world. The fatwa against organ donation was eventually repealed in 1985 in part due to the critical, yet necessary conversations he initiated amongst our religious elites and wider Malay/Muslim community.

7 One key idea which I had heard from Prof Alatas himself was his view of history and civilization as a struggle between two types in human society, the progressive versus the predatory. If the progressive type triumphed, then society will develop and progress. If the predatory type triumphed, then you will have corruption and backwardness in that society. Throughout history, in the smaller arenas of families, mosques, organisations and politics, all kinds of people jostle for power and control. Prof Alatas emphasized that it was in our interest as a community that we need to be progressive so that we can live a meaningful socio-religious life.

Objective and rational thinking

8 Prof Alatas also offered a voice of reason and rationality, particularly in the face of adversity. I recall sitting in Ba'alwie Mosque in 2001, post-9/11. Prof Alatas reminded us that even though many prejudiced views about Islam were coming from Western writers, we must continue to be open to learning from the best of Western civilization, in particular its scientific tradition and creativity.

9 It was a reminder for our community that we ought to strive to be rational and objective rather than emotional, open rather than insular in the face of challenges. It also was rooted in his belief that without knowledge you cannot face the world effectively, let alone discuss and debate intelligently and rationally. He had an undying thirst for knowledge, a deep passion for reading and learning from others. From sociology, Islam, the Malay community to traditional medicine and even car mechanics, Prof Alatas would not hesitate to read on a wide variety of topics. And yet, at the same time he also embraced the idea of learning outside the confines of the library. He welcomed engaging with people from all walks of life – from plumbers to mechanics to scholars and politicians. Prof Alatas was never parochial in his views, instead he embraced a diversity of ideas and had an open mind. He taught us that we can derive knowledge from anyone, irrespective of his station in life.

A Heart for Southeast Asia

10 My friends and I often met Prof Alatas at his home in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Occasionally, he would lament about some issue or other in our community. He did so because of his love and rootedness for the community. He was in essence a Southeast Asianist – anchored in this region, and deeply concerned about the well being and development of the Malay people. He defined progress of the community not simply in material terms, but through the depth of how we as a community could discern and think critically.

11 Many may not know this, that he had a brief interlude in politics, launching the new party called Gerakan which was committed to the idea of multiracialism for Malaysia. It showed that he had the courage and took great personal risk to his life and career to enter the rough and tumble of politics. He did so because he believed in doing something to overcome the challenges facing Malaysian society. We are having this inaugural lecture against the backdrop of the historic 14th Malaysian general election. I reflected on what the late Prof Al-Atas might have said about the process and outcome. I think he would have approved fully the coming out of Dr Mahathir especially given his keen interest in the issues of corruption. And I suspect, in true good nature, Dr Mahathir would call upon him to play his part in remaking Malaysia. I bumped into Dr Mahathir at Prof Al-Atas's funeral in Kuala Lumpur. He has great respect for Prof Al-Atas and his contribution to Malaysian society.

Closing Remarks

12 So, in closing, there are many insights I gained from this great thinker, the late Prof Alatas. His ideas on openness and rationality are particular relevant in today's fragmented world. This quality of his character and personality endeared him to all whom he met. Prof Alatas set a concrete example in how we too, as a community, can embrace diversity and commit ourselves to a life of genuine curiosity and learning. And in this we are deeply indebted to him. And we have to thank the late Mrs Alatas, Farid and his two sisters for allowing us, and the community to have a bit of Prof Alatas. They tolerated patiently the many nights and long hours we spent at their home here at 11 Ross Avenue in Singapore and in Kuala Lumpur, discussing and learning from Prof Alatas. Many among us can cite the long hours we spent with him.

13 I hope that you will learn more about the impact of this man and his ideas through this annual memorial lecture. I hope you will also use this opportunity to reflect on his legacy for the community and wider Singapore. May this annual memorial lecture inspire us to do Prof Alatas proud, by always striving towards being a progressive community of excellence.

Thank you.