

**MALAYSIA
IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

A Conference to celebrate 20 years
of the Tun Razak Distinguished Chair
in Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University

organized

by

Ohio University

With the cooperation of the Asia Society, the Malaysia-America Society,
the US-ASEAN Business Council and the Malaysian Strategic Research Center

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2000-2002

Set: December 9, 2001
Revised: December 13, 2001
Revised : January 28, 2002
Revised: February 7, 2002

1. The occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Tun Razak Distinguished Chair in Southeast East Asian Studies at Ohio University is a splendid opportunity to take pause on Malaysia's progress and its prospects for the future. In the last two and a half decades, Malaysia has leapfrogged from being a subsistence economy and raw material producer to become a middle-income nation-state, one of the "tigers" of the Asia-Pacific, as well as being a stable country with good governance in spite of the nature of its plural society and attendant problems of political awakening. At this juncture of the beginning of the twenty-first century, whilst Malaysia's past achievements in economic modernization and political development has been a lauded feat, the future beckons with tremendous challenges in the wake of globalization and, inter alia, rapid changes in the information and communication technology sector.

2. The challenges of modernization and social transformation in the twenty-first century will be as complex as they were in the twentieth century; indeed, there are those who argue that such challenges will have to deal with issues of modernity and a "post-modern" world. In dealing with such challenges Malaysia's policies and approaches have been as innovative and illuminating as they have at times appeared bewildering and "nonconforming" to observers, foreign and local alike, admirers and critics. But it seems undeniable that Malaysia's story, if we may call it, has been one of relative success in the Third World, even described by the World Bank as one example of the "miracle economies of Asia." Through affirmative action policies and steadfast government action, Malaysia has made tremendous strides in poverty alleviation at the same time as it has

emphasized export-led industrialization that today it ranks as one of the world's top twenty trading nations. In the last quarter of the past century, Malaysia has also demonstrated its capacity for regional and world leadership, and contributed to humanitarian intervention and UN peacekeeping efforts. It has been a lead nation in ASEAN and has been at the forefront of initiatives to expand Pacific Asia's collective identity and regional cohesion. Malaysia has also been active in the provision of aid, assistance and advice to lesser-developed nations – especially in Africa, and stands as an example of relative success in meeting the challenges to modernization that other countries may emulate.

3. Malaysia's success and role as a significant actor in Southeast Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific, indeed the world, is subject to the newer and ever evolving challenges of a globalizing world, a world of nation-states and new transnational actors buffeted by innovations in technology and communications that sometimes render obsolete earlier and present notions of sovereignty, of interdependence in world trade and transnational commercial transactions and undertakings, of an ever increasing imperative to be on the global grid and regional networks even as political and economic independence requires national leadership and resolve and the sustained authority of the state and its institutions. Even as Malaysia forges ahead with a global outlook, it continues at the same time to confront changes of a modernizing society from within, of an altering socio-political landscape and a changing demography, of meeting the demands arising out of the consequences of rapid political change and socio-economic transformation. The parameters of ethnicity that so vividly described Malaysia's complex society is now being transformed to include the element of religion, more specifically the role of Islam

and its resurgence, a phenomenon that may have vast ramifications for a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society in the throes of modernization.

4. How will Malaysia face up to the challenges of the Twenty-First-Century? Will it have the capacity to innovate and absorb the rapid changes and transformations of the new Millennium? Can it balance the forces of free thinking modernization and the spiritual demands of religion, between material goals and the pursuit of the life hereafter? Can it govern as demands increase, and respond to the forces that want a more democratic space? Can it achieve the goal of a developed society spelt out in Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir's "Vision 2020"? Will new leaders emerge who will sustain Malaysia's dynamism?

5. In view of the above, it is to be reminded that the establishment in 1980 of the Tun Razak Chair at Ohio University as a significant development in Malaysia's road to modernity and development as it is a sterling example of educational and cultural cooperation between it and the United States. Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister, also dubbed as the country's "father of development", was an administrator extraordinaire, but also sought to improve his people's lot from economic backwardness and poverty and to see his country emerge in prosperity and peace. It is his vision that embodies the Tun Razak Chair in relation to Malaysia's quest for educational and economic upliftment, which Malaysia stands to gain from bilateral and multilateral cooperation as it looks outwards and forward.

6. The twentieth anniversary conference of the Tun Razak Chair is therefore not only cause for celebration of the Razak chair and of Malaysia's success, but also an

opportunity to examine Malaysia's present trends and future prospects as it confronts the twenty-first century. For the first time since the establishment of the Razak Chair, this 20th Anniversary conference will be held in the capital of the United States. The conference has the following objectives:-

- a) to examine Malaysia's future prospects in modernization;
- b) to assess Malaysia's role in regional and international affairs in a globalizing world; and
- c) to highlight and allow wider dissemination of Malaysia's record, especially to policy relevant observers in the DC area

7. The 20th Anniversary Razak Conference is being organized by Ohio University in partnership with the Asia Society, the Malaysia-America Society, the US-ASEAN Business Council and the Malaysian Strategic Research Center. The collaboration between these organizations is a vivid illustration of international cooperation in an endeavor that seeks greater understanding of the progress of Malaysia and Asia and the challenges of the 21st century.
8. The venue of the conference will be the Conference Hall of the new premises of the Embassy of Malaysia.
9. The program of the conference is attached as Annexure I.