

# Asean@50: Build on the dreams of the founding fathers

As Asean celebrates its Golden Jubilee, it is opportune for us to take a step back and ask our people what they want of the regional bloc in the next 50 years before striving forward together as one community.



**KHAIRY JAMALUDDIN**

THERE has never been a better time to examine Asean as a regional bloc, how far we have come and where we are heading next. It has been exactly 50 years since Asean was formed and since then, this regional bloc has never been stronger and more prominent in the global stage.

Malaysia will always be a pro-active member of Asean and other multilateral organisations. Our success story as a nation has been predicated upon the stability provided by a multilateral framework. Malaysia as a country is one that reaches beyond its potential and one that has always set its sight on the distant future. For that reason, we must be integrated into a region that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The past is prologue while the future is ours to shape. While taking lessons from the past, we must continue the work of building the future.

Immediately after the 1969 riots, Malaysia embarked on the New Economic Policy, which was to be a new deal for Malaysia in eradicating poverty and rebalancing the economic distribution in the country. Thirty years later, that was followed by Vision 2020, which would leapfrog Malaysia to a country that is modern and developed.

As we are nearing 2020, it became imperative for us to ask ourselves "what's next?". The world in 2050 will be much different from the world today - what will guide us to face this future?

This is why my ministry has been tasked to reach as many youths as possible to get their aspirations of what they want to see the nation be in the future, to be recorded in a massive plan called the National Transformation 2050 (TN50).

TN50 is an initiative to plan for the future of Malaysia in the period between 2020 and 2050. From the vision of becoming a developed nation, we should strive to be among the top countries in economic development, citizen well-being and innovation.

For this, I've spent the first six months of 2017 travelling through all corners of



**Voice of the future:** Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin listening to ideas from 12-year-old Mohamed Shameel Mohamed Sareel at a recent TN50 dialogue session.

Malaysia, reaching out to more than one million youths and what they aspire for. Most of them coalesce around wanting a future that is fair, sustainable, competitive, united and happy.

What that means is we want a future that goes beyond the old measurement of GDP growth as an indicator of success to one that looks at well-being more comprehensively. One that looks into wealth and income inequality, healthcare, access to quality education, environmental protection, a good standard of living, integrated public transport, sporting achievements, civic consciousness and greater investments into scientific research, among many others.

With shared dreams come shared responsibility - and nothing binds a society better than having a common weight on their shoulders. Similarly, as Asean heads towards 2050, it is opportune for us to take a step back, ask our people what they want of Asean in 2050 and then strive forward together as one community.

The challenge of automation and robots,

the need for a differently skilled and adaptive workforce, the breakdown of societal fabric into smaller family units, the shifting powerhouses in global trade and many other challenges await us in the near horizon.

Though individual countries are looking at these in their own way, there are many areas we can embrace together, leveraging on individual strength to compensate for individual weaknesses, so Asean can futureproof the region and truly become a global powerhouse in the next 33 years.

What would we like Asean to be in the next decade, or five decades? The current generation entrusted with the responsibility to shape the future of Asean would like to see an Asean that will be able to realise all of its potential. An association consisting of 10 sovereign high-income nations fully developed with prosperity for all. It is indeed a tall objective, but not an impossible one, for Asean is a work perpetually in progress passing from one generation to the next, a sacred trust to be upheld.

I am an eternal optimist on the future of

Asean and I am a firm believer in its role as the catalyst for peace and prosperity in this region. Our fate in Asean has been pre-determined by our geography. As the saying goes, we can choose our friends but we cannot choose our neighbours.

The success of one nation in the region will have a positive bearing on all, while the failure of any will have a calamitous effect on all. Asean's future is in its togetherness. We can either leverage on our collective strengths to soar together towards greater heights or go separately to face a more dangerous and challenging world.

Economically, we must continue to build upon the Asean Economic Community. More integration is needed, not less. By all means draw lessons from Brexit but the right ones, not the wrong ones. We must be serious to further bring down barriers to trade both tariff and non-tariff.

We must work to better integrate our economy and welcome investments, ease the process of doing business, and protect intellectual property while better leveraging our various competitive advantages. Healthy competition coupled with pragmatic cooperation must be the way forward.

We must work to make Asean more relevant to the needs of members and the challenges that they are facing, be it political, security or economic. Asean will continue to thrive, despite its many challenges, if every member perseveres to make it a national priority, for the national interest of each member could only be advanced effectively through Asean collectively.

The first 50 years is coming to an end, so let us now turn the work at hand to the next 50 years dedicating it to the future generation. Let us continue to build on the dreams of the founding fathers of Asean who started a journey so improbable that they themselves in their wildest imaginations never could have thought how successful it would eventually be.

That 50 years later, we are marvelling at their collective wisdom in every capital of a united Asean is the most fitting tribute of all to this greatest and most enduring of endeavours.

**Khairy Jamaluddin is the Youth and Sports Minister. This is one of a series of articles to mark the 50th anniversary of the regional grouping by the Asean members of the Asia News Network. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.**