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1st MBRAS Lecture 2017

Founded Upon the Principles of Liberty and Justice: The Development of the Democratic Mindset in
Malaysia

by YAM Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin ibni Tuanku Muhriz

Badan Warisan Malaysia,
Jalan Stonor, Ampang,
Kuala Lumpur
Saturday, 18 February 2017, 5 p.m.

Abstract

Politicians and statesmen invoke certain words and phrases in front of their (simultaneously multiple) audiences to convey certain ideological aspirations. But to what extent, and how, did Tunku Abdul Rahman's use of "liberty and justice" at the Proclamation of Independence and on Malaysia Day – as well as other references to democracy and freedom in his speeches and writings – resonate with his Malayan and Malaysian audiences? Is (or was) there a shared Malaysian democratic mindset rooted in or inspired by widely-consumed writings and actions of the past? If not, could there be?

In this short lecture, Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin will consider these questions with references to several well-known and oft-quoted words and phrases over the centuries.

Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin ibn Tuanku Muhriz is the Founding President of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS); a Trustee of Yayasan Chow Kit; Yayasan Munarah, the Jeffrey Cheah Foundation and the Genovasi Foundation; an Independent Non-Executive Director of two public listed companies; an advisor or patron to numerous educational and cultural organisations; a committee member of several societies; and a columnist in three newspapers. Educated at Marlborough College and at the London School of Economics, he has worked for the World Bank. He is a Research Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and has also held an Eisenhower Fellowship.

The Lecture

Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin's lecture began at 5.10 p.m., after the speaker was introduced by MBRAS Treasurer Dato' H.S. Barlow. Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin presented an erudite lecture on the development of the democratic mindset in Malaysia. Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin began by tracing the historical journey of the Federal Constitution as the supreme law of the land, with landmarks such as the 1963 Malaysia Agreement and the 1970 enactment of Rukunegara that sought to boost the democratic spirit embodied in the country's constitutional principles. Tuanku Zain Al-'Abidin took the position that since then however, the democratic spirit that originally permeated throughout the Constitution had been gradually and steadily eroded.

Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin illustrated his talk throughout by drawing broadly on numerous examples across the broad spectrum of Malaysian history to show instances where the early spirit and practice of democracy could be discerned. During the lecture, the audience was reminded from excerpts in the Sejarah Melayu (the Malay Annals), the Undang-Undang Melaka (the Malaccan Laws), the Undang-Undang Kedah (the Kedah Laws) and from an episode which involved Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin's own ancestor Raja Melewar, of the spirit of consensus, democracy and constitutionalism that had long been at the heart of Malay political culture.

Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin promoted the idea of using multiple narratives that exist to counter the regressive forces that sought to curtail the supremacy of the Constitution. In this regard, he again displayed remarkable familiarity with Malaysian history when he persuaded the audience that the strands of democratic heritage inherent in ancient Malay texts such as the Sejarah Melayu or the Undang-Undang Melaka could be harnessed in order to restore democracy and consensus to its rightful place in the Constitution.

The question and answer session that followed reflected the audience's enthusiastic response to the talk and displayed a level of concern about an issue that was frequently taken for granted. From among the audience, questions were asked as to whether Malaysians possessed the necessary mindset to practice democracy, whether democracy itself was a sustainable system, amidst comments that today's democratic space has been cramped to the point where material affluence threatened some of the basic foundations of the country's governing principles that had been installed within the Federal Constitution and functioned since the country acquired its independence in 1957. The lecture on the whole had been well-received and it was only with the greatest reluctance that the stimulating session was brought to a close by 6.10 p.m.





