

***“Europe and the Global South:  
A Reconvergence of Visions and Values”***

***Speech by YAB Prime Minister  
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at the Korber Stiftung, Berlin***

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Assalamualaikum and *Grüße*,

1. “Where did I come from? It’s still a question;  
I’m barely aware of my path here,  
Today now and here in the heavenly day  
Meet like friends, pain and pleasure.  
Oh sweet happiness when both unite!”
2. So wrote Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the great man of letters and emblem of the soul of Germany, in his *West-östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan), inspired by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet-mystic Muhammad Shamsuddin Hafiz.
3. The prescription to “meet like friends, pain and pleasure” so as to attain “sweet happiness” in unity, underscores the fundamental foundation for the cultivation of common values, indeed, universalistic in nature, whereupon the East and West can find convergence.

4. To my mind, these are words for posterity that ring so true as we stand on the intersection where cultures and societies are poised to diverge.
  
5. Born a half century after Goethe, the poet and novelist Heinrich Heine, who was often a target of vile criticism by anti-Semites because of his Jewish origin, declared: "...the *Divan* bears testimony to the fact that the West, being dissatisfied with its weak and cold spiritual existence, now seeks warmth from the bosom of the East."
  
6. In his *Letter to Goethe*, the Syrian cosmopolitan poet par excellence, Ali Ahmad Said Esber, better known to us as Adonis, wrote:
  
7. The West is behind you, but the East is not before me.  
They are two banks of one river.  
One has become more than an abyss,  
more than a rock;  
Sisyphus is its voice screaming:  
Sinbad wanders the sea of his Islam,  
Gilgamesh is dead, and Ulysses is lost among his waves.

One body is ripped limb by limb:  
A body that has no East except its name,  
A body that has no West except its name.”

8. Back in 1972, Adonis, who had been described by the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, as the “most daring and provocative Arab poet” had proclaimed that poetry “is a permanent movement in a human revolutionary horizon for the sake of a better world and a higher human life.” (*Zaman al-Shi‘r* [The Time of Poetry]).
9. Inspired by the *Divan*, a hundred years after its publication, Muhammad Iqbal, the South Asian poet-philosopher, wrote his *Payam-i-Mashriq* (Message from the East). He wrote, “it was out of my waves that you arose. Born of me, you come back to me, come back to be a part of me”, highlighting how single individuals are nothing but another drop in the vast sea of collective humanity.”
10. We must recognise that openness to and tolerance of “The Other” is a priceless trait. But mere tolerance is not enough, we need to accept, cherish, and celebrate our differences. For inspiration, let us recall the iconic literary and cultural exchange between Goethe and Iqbal, who although separated by time, were connected esoterically.

11. The legacy of these outstanding literati lies in their utility as an exemplar to us who live in this millennium. The nuances in Goethe and Iqbal's cultural borrowings and observations enjoin us against essentialising any group. The intimacy of ideas created by literature and the familiarity of coexistence seamlessly complement each other.
12. Goethe's poem signifies the paramount importance of inclusiveness in societal and even civilisational dealings as an underlying value essential for convergence.
13. Indeed, to embrace the world with fundamental values in order to attain higher ideals, Goethe breathed new life into German literature and set it alight on the lofty dimensions of the universe. The message is clear: Build bridges, not walls, for that is what the world needs now, more than ever.
14. Universalistic understanding is not confined to spatial or temporal limits. In the same vein, we should not be held to ransom by the view that a reconvergence of visions and values between Europe and the Global South is an impossible dream.
15. The fact is that we have palpable exposure to and interact on multiple levels with individuals and groups

from largely different backgrounds. The East encounters the West every day; Islam lives in the West, and a great many traditions and ideas from the West are thriving in Muslim communities.

16. And yet, we need a deep introspection to fathom why we seem to have lost that sense of belonging to the family of our humanity. Why have we lost that legacy that is an inherent part of us to reach out to 'The Other'?

17. We should work towards a reconvergence, based on shared values and norms. We should look at a symbiosis of differing cultures realised via a positive, accumulative, and enlightening way.

## **The Global South as a political and economic collective**

Ladies and gentlemen,

18. The turn of the new century has seen a shift in wealth from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific. This has given rise to narratives that the world's new engines of growth are, in fact, being generated in the Global South.

19. In a knee jerk reaction to the Global South's new economic stature, we witness reinvigorated

discussions on the coming of an “Asian Century” or a “post-Western world”. While it is true that countries firmly in the Global South are making progress and aspiring for a deeper footprint in global affairs, they are doing so in a cooperative, collaborative and collegial way.

20. Hence, rather than eyeing these developments with suspicion or hostility, we should welcome this with an open mind.

21. Willy Brandt once said that “the walls in people’s heads are sometimes more durable than walls made of concrete”. This rings true today, as it did at the height of the Cold War. You have torn down the wall dividing the city, now we, and I emphasise, we – we must therefore also tear down old concepts and perceptions of ourselves and each other.

22. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, “we cannot revive old factions, we cannot revive old policies, or follow an antique drum”.

## **Bridging the Difference: EU and a Changed Global South**

23. Nevertheless, I recognise there are growing divergences between Europe and a changed Global South, particularly in the approach towards

governance and partnerships. While Europe emphasises the building of institutions, the Global South believes in a more bottom-up, laissez-faire approach.

24. These differences are not insurmountable. They can be remedied if we take the time to understand our current priorities and past history. We must be mindful that the past informs the future, and along with it our contemporary security, economic, and environmental imperatives.

25. Nonetheless, there is a huge mismatch between Europe's self-perception as a normative power and what the Global South believes. The question is, how do we bridge this gap, and move forward?

26. Europe and the Global South need a concerted strategy to reshape multilateralism for mutual interests. We need to broker a way forward to address the democratic deficit in traditional multilateral forums.

27. We need to talk with each other, not at each other. Engagement needs to be made earnestly, honestly, and respectfully. This will help to foster mutual trust.

## **Islamophobia and the Challenge to Peaceful Coexistence**

Ladies and gentlemen,

28. Islamophobia is becoming increasingly virulent, driven by ideological, political, and religious hostility that descends into insidious racism. Unchecked and left to fester, Islamophobia could very well tear at the fabric of societal cohesion. As a heterogeneous and multicultural society, Malaysia is sensitive to the security implications of racial and religious divisions, as well as dangers of extremism.

29. In this regard, I am heartened by Germany's acknowledgement of the dangers of Islamophobia. The recognition by the Federal Government of anti-Muslim sentiments and the political pushbacks against the far-right are clearly indicative of a commitment to stem the tide of extremism and racism.

### **The Crisis in Palestine**

30. Today, both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism has, like a parasite, gorged on the crisis in Palestine, manifesting itself through contrived discourse, polarised media, and severing kinship.



31. It bears stressing that support for the Palestinian cause is not just a matter for the Arabs or Muslims. As we have seen, it is a clarion call taken up by most in the Global South, countries that have suffered under the yoke of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation.
32. Now, Germany has a highly regarded tradition of producing meticulous and critical scholars of the Orient. Germany has shown the world a benchmark in implementing long-term reparations to the state's Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Indeed, expressions of even outward displays of contrition for past transgressions are laudable, and ought to be emulated.
33. Nevertheless, the sins of the past cannot justify the transgressions of the present. Nothing warrants the wanton killing of innocent lives, that much is clear. And certainly nothing warrants the protracted decimation of the Palestinian people. We cannot proclaim "never again" and yet look away from the bloodletting and butchering of tens of thousands of civilians, women, and children.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

34. Rather than being held captive and chained by closed mindsets and a predilection to prejudices, I firmly believe that leaders, in the Global South and Europe, have a moral responsibility to foster healthy and vibrant discourses on what truly matters to us as humankind.

35. To clear the misunderstandings and misgivings concerning the precepts and faiths that we espouse, the political systems that we are partial to, and the cultural diversity that we hold dear, we must transcend narrow identities and embrace a wider humanity for the future.

36. Terima kasih and danke.