The Centre for Democratic Institutions
Annual Address

30 April 2003

Dr Surin Pitsuwan

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

ROLAND RICH:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The Honourable Dr Surin Pitsuwan, the Honourable Mrs Chris Gallus, Excellencies, colleagues. Welcome to the 2003 annual address of the Centre for Democratic Institutions.

We're most privileged today to have as our guest speaker Dr Surin Pitsuwan. By coming here and speaking to us today, Dr Surin continues a tradition of highly distinguished speakers that have consented to grace this event. The honour roll reads with great distinction, and I think Mrs Gallus might actually list the people who have spoken in the past at this event

The Australian Government established the Centre for Democratic Institutions five years ago in an attempt to help strengthen governance practices in our neighbouring countries, particularly by promoting the concept of democratic governance.

But what we quickly learned was that promoting democracy is certainly not a one-way street. It's a process of dialogue. And in that process of dialogue, Australia, of course, needs to listen as well as to talk a little bit.

And it's for this reason that we thought it very useful to have distinguished speakers come to Australia - come to Canberra - and speak on a topic that really is one of the great question of our time - can democracy become the universally accepted form of governance? Dr Surin will add his voice today on that question, looking in particular at the question of Islam and democracy.

I'm very pleased to have today as our other guest to introduce Dr Surin, Mrs Chris Gallus. For Mrs Gallus this is something of a homecoming in that she graduated from the Australian National University. She is the Member for Hindmarsh in South Australia, and is serving her fifth term in the House of Representatives.

She is currently the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and she holds specific responsibility for the oversight of Australia's aid program. And I must say she's been a very enthusiastic supporter of CDI.

To introduce our guest speaker, please make welcome Mrs Chris Gallus.

[applause]

Mrs CHRIS GALLUS:

Thank you very much Roland. Dr Surin Pitsuwan, Mrs Charuwan Lovisuth, Minister at the Royal Thai Embassy, Excellencies, my parliamentary colleagues, members of the Thai Update, members of the faculties of the ANU, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm very pleased to be with you today to introduce the 2003 Annual Address at the Centre for Democratic Institutions, the fifth since CDI's establishment. As Mr Rich has already told you, Mr Downer established CDI in 1998.

Its reason for existence is to put into action this Government's commitment to better governance and stronger democratic institutions in the Asia Pacific region. The work of CDI supports a range of other activities taken through the aid program that also support and promote good governance.

With many of our neighbours struggling with the challenge of democratic governance, today's address, Dr Surin, is particularly relevant.

Focusing on the parliamentary and judicial sectors, CDI seeks to achieve its goals by providing a combination of short-term intensive training courses, exchanges of placements and networking opportunities for officials. Since its inception CDI conducted more than 8,000 training days for about 1,700 participants from 12 countries, including Thailand, but also other countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vanuatu. Feedback from participants confirmed the value of these interactions.

CDI's Annual Address provides a unique opportunity for an interested Australian audience to hear the views and the insights of leading political figures into key issues in the area of democratic political practice. I am looking forward very much to today's address by Dr Surin, who follows a distinguished cast of presenters, including Mikhail Gorbachev, Sir Anthony Siaguru from Papua New Guinea, Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister of Thailand, and former Philippines President, Fidel Ramos.

Dr Surin will share with us his views on what is a very topical subject - Islam and democracy. Dr Surin has had a long and active career in Thai national politics. Since being elected an MP in 1986 - you beat me by four years, Dr Surin - he has occupied many senior positions, including that of Minister for Foreign Affairs from '97 to 2001.

He continues today as a Member of Parliament representing the Democratic Party, and we have shared our common views of the strength of the lower-house in democracies. Prior to becoming involved in Thai politics, Dr Pitsuwan spent some time working with the United States Congress and Senate. During this time he put his considerable experience in academia and journalism to good use, focusing on international policy and issues such as immigration, foreign affairs, and aid.

Domestically Dr Surin has focused on the political and human rights problems facing Muslim communities in southern Thailand. Internationally, his studies have focused on the Middle East. To bring this wealth of practical and academic knowledge together, I would now like to warmly invite Dr Surin Pitsuwan to present the CDI Annual Address for 2003.

[applause]

DR SURIN PITSUWAN:

Honourable colleagues, the Honourable Mrs Chris Gallus, Excellency Roland Rich, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and for my Muslim brothers and sisters in the audience al-salaam alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu. I guess many of you haven't heard that before.

It is a great privilege to stand before you at this very august institution - the Centre for Democratic Institutions, here at the Australian National University - and to talk about a topic that is very close and dear to my heart.

Who am I to be qualified to speak on this topic? I was born Abdul Halim bin Ismael from Nakhon si Thammarat, southern Thailand. I was born in a Pesantran. In Southern Thailand we call it Pondok. I was born in a Madrassah. I was born in a Madhhab, a basic Muslim Islamic education institution that many of you around the world today are saying needs to be reformed, particularly after the abuses of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the problems in Pakistan and the problems in the Middle East. Many of you are focusing your attention on the basic madrassah - the basic institutions of learning in the Islamic community – the Islamic Ummah.

But here I am. If the Thai Government could make me a spokesman of Thailand, an emerging budding democracy which has been a successful democracy for the last few decades then I think there's value in trying to understand Islam and what ingredients it can contribute to democracy.

I'll tell you a story before I begin the main part of my lecture. Thirteen days before September 11, 2001, the Government of Austria called a meeting in Salzburg, Austria. This meeting was attended by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. It was called 'A Dialogue Among Civilisations'.

At that dialogue was a representative of the Jewish tradition Rabbi Schneider, from New York, Hans Kung, Professor of Catholic Thought, from Switzerland, an adviser to President Khatami of Iran, the original proponent of 'A Dialogue Among Civilisations', myself, and a few others.

At the beginning of the dialogue, the Secretary-General proposed that it was time we talked about global civilisation. Hans Kung said "But what's going to happen to my Catholic civilisation?" Rabbi Schneider said "What's going to happen to my Jewish civilisation?" The representative from Iran said "What's going to happen to my Islamic Shi'ite civilisation?"

I, being a Muslim diplomat from Thailand, a Buddhist majority country, raised my hand and said "Mr Secretary-General, maybe it's not quite time yet to talk about global civilisation because I can sense that exponents and representatives of those great civilisations are still very much attached and emotionally hanging on to their own particular civilisations."

I proposed that maybe we talk about global consciousness. We should talk about global awareness, which I see emerging everywhere - in every country and corner of the Earth today. I think this meeting here is in that spirit - the spirit of co-operation. It is in the spirit of mutual respect in search of something that will help us bridge the gaps among us and between us, a gap that seems to be widening as the process of globalisation moves onward.

I think if you talk about the fundamental teachings of any religion you can find kernels - you can find the seeds of ideas and principles that would lead you in any direction of political ideologies. When you think of democracy, at least liberal democracy, as something that is rather young in our human history; if you think of democracy as a mixture of various ideas, values and cultures from across the world and from all civilisations, then you must also agree that democracy is something of a modern invention. It is the consequence and result of cross-fertilisation of ideas.

If, in the Middle Ages, the question "Is democracy possible?" was asked of the Christian hierarchy, Kings, lords or the great nobility, I am sure nobody would have thought that liberal democracy would be possible two, three or even four hundred years later.

If you asked this question of the Jewish leaders, whose religion is a celebration of the covenants, I am sure the answer would have been "Not likely." But then through transformation, transfusion, migration and the European diaspora, came forth the State of Israel - a state that one would call a democracy.

As with the other civilisation - Islam is the same. I was born in the Pesantran in a desert and tribal setting; in a religion which is a continuation of the tradition of monotheism from Judaism, to Christianity, to Islam. The uniqueness of Islam is that we count every prophet all the way back to Adam. Adam is a prophet of Islam. Moses is a prophet of Islam. Jesus is a prophet of Islam. The only difference is that we believe that Mohammed is the last prophet. After him there can be no more.

Islam however, counts backward. I believe the Jews stopped at Malachi - Jesus is not one of their prophets. The Christians do not consider that there were any prophets after Jesus - Mohammed is not one of their prophets. However all three traditions belong to the same monotheistic tradition of humanity.

Now there are 1.5 billion Muslims on this Earth. What are we going to do about that? What are you going to do about that? One out of every five people walking on this Earth is a Muslim. Have we simply become a source of violence and terrorism? Have we suddenly become backward?

I think it is important that we understand the frustration, the emotions and the feelings of the Muslims today. Muslims are very proud of their glorious past, but are always reminded of the injustices that have been imposed upon them from the outside. Muslims

are frustrated by the present injustices they feel. Muslims are also inspired by the unwavering fate that they will be vindicated in the end.

Islam is a very strong religion. It has a very strong identity, sometimes uncompromisingly so. But I think given that the last two or three hundred years have produced a record of interference, invasion and colonialism the process of evolution, diversification and development has not been continuous in the Muslim world in comparison to other parts of the world or with other civilisations.

In the past, Muslim scholars conducted research on the wisdoms of the Greeks. Muslim scholars, when Europe was in the Dark Ages, interpreted, translated and commented on the texts of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They produced texts on medicine, astronomy and philosophy. What did they do with the scholarship they had invented, innovated, adapted and interpreted? They passed it on to the Christian fathers in the monasteries in Rome. From there it flowed through to the Renaissance, the industrial revolution, the Age of Enlightenment and to the power that would lead Europe into the Levant, into the Middle East and into the Holy Land in the form of colonialism.

There was a series of invasions and interference from Europe. Then came the establishment of the State of Israel. The Palestinian and Israeli issue is an issue that is deep, emotional, frustrating and unforgiving for a lot of Muslims around the world, not only for the Palestinians and Arabs.

The fact that it has not been resolved fairly, justly, equitably has given rise to violent movements. These emotions, sentiments and frustrations have somehow surfaced in the political evolution of almost every Muslim country. Muslims have been denied the opportunity to evolve their own democratic tradition. But this does not mean that we are incapable of evolving, developing and innovating a system that would lead a democracy in some form.

Most people look at Islam as one monolithic religion. But here in South East Asia there is Indonesia, a neighbour to Australia of 200-plus million and the largest Muslim country in the world. Together with Malaysia, the south of Thailand and the south of the Philippines, they have gone through their own specific process of diversification, innovation, adaptation, just as have other nations and other societies in the world.

What is the reason that Muslims in South East Asia are more moderate, flexible and more adaptable than Muslims in the heartland? I think when Islam came to South East Asia, Islam found South East Asia already very well informed by two major religions - Hinduism and Buddhism. It was forced to adapt, adopt, and innovate.

I call us here in South East Asia, Muslims in the periphery. We are more flexible, moderate and ready to adapt and adopt. We were forced to from the very beginning in order to fit the local cultures, values and civilisations already in existence.

Look for example at the role of women. You cannot dream of putting South East Asian Muslim women behind the wall. Because when Islam came to South East Asia, women were already working in the field. They were already planting rice and marketing their wares. The impact and the influence of Islam will be different on different peoples, and cultures including in South East Asia.

Therefore Muslims in South East Asia, Muslims in Malaysia, are somewhat like other developing societies. They are diversifying their economy, developing their institutions and slowly trying to open up the system. They have come up with a model that seems to be working.

To me Malaysia is the only Muslim society that is effectively facing modernity and globalisation. We used to laugh about them when they were trying to achieve what they called the "Islamisation" process of knowledge of the economy, society and of education. But look what they have achieved – a nation that is working well. It is becoming a model for Muslims everywhere.

Of course the Malaysian model is not perfect. It is not something that has to be accepted without amendment. It can be embellished, modified and improved upon but it is a rich model and at least it is working. I was saying this before September 11 but very few would listen and agree. This is because there is a certain leader that somehow the West cannot understand nor handle. Now Malaysia is a model Islamic society progressing and moving along the process of globalisation.

In the Middle East, there is this idea of turning Iraq into a democracy following from which there will be a march of democracy throughout the Middle East. Well, it will be a very long march. This is because, as I said, countries in the heartland of Islam have not benefited from the process of opening up and diversification that all developing countries have to go through.

Wealth came in the late sixties, seventies, eighties and in the nineties. But that wealth, rather than allowing the country and the society to open up, somehow closed it down further. It is called the rentier economy – one of natural resources, distributed from one centre and one system. There is one supreme patron – the Government. The rest become clients.

Wealth came to somehow stifle any opportunity for transformation, reform, innovation and diversification. Rather than help propel society into modernity and globalisation, it somehow restrained it.

What you see in the Middle East is not development. What you see in the Middle East is modernity. Modernity you can buy. If you have the money you can buy all the gadgets of the latest invention, but there is very little development. That is the distinction. But in Malaysia and Indonesia you see greater efforts for human resource development, a process that forces a country to be more open. The society is diversifying. Therefore there is room for participation, access and for give and take within the same Islamic

society, even with its different setting, structure and cultural background. Muslims in some parts of the world, particularly in the periphery, are certainly struggling for and opening up to democracy.

I once asked President Khatami of Iran, a Shi'ite, this hypothetical question. You remember that Aristotle in 'Politics' made a distinction between a good man and a good citizen. Aristotle said a good man is universally good. He is good everywhere, no matter what environment, what regime or what culture he or she is in. A good man is good universally. Aristotle said a good citizen depends on the regime. If you live under tyranny you have one form of good citizen. If you live under democracy you have another form of citizenship.

I asked President Khatami this question: There are two men. One lives in a closed society. Every minute of his life is prescribed. He has to follow the rules of Islam. He has to pray five times a day. He has to fast. He has to pay his alms - his zakat. He has to do everything prescribed by the law, government, regime and police. He is a good Muslim.

There is another Muslim who lives in an open society, with all the choices to be bad. In Thailand, for example there are places like Patpong which some of you may know. Yet he remains good. He prays five times a day. He fasts. He pays his alms and does everything that the religion requires of him. He lives in an open society with all the choices to be bad. Which is the better Muslim? President Khatami clapped his knees and laughed. He said "You from South East Asia are better that many Muslims around here".

My point is, as a Muslim politician from a minority, from Thailand, Islam can inspire you to become a good democrat. Islam can also inspire a society to become a democracy. It depends on the historical context. It depends on the existing situations. It depends on various factors that have to somehow work in order to propel that process of democratisation forward.

That certainly does not happen in many countries in the heartland of Islam, because they did not have the impetus to do it. They did not have the stimulus to do it. They were not forced by circumstances, while countries like Malaysia were. Freedom House once rated Gambia and Northern Cyprus as the only two Muslim societies that are free and open. The rest, they said, are not. But Malaysia and Indonesia are open societies that have to negotiate and mediate between various conflicting values and cultures. They have to respect the history and background of others and therefore not pursue a fundamentalist or puritan Islam. In Malaysia, some may want it. However, the Government has been wise enough to resist successfully. It depends on the historical, sociological, cultural and political processes and contexts that Islam happens to find itself as to whether it can progress to democracy or not.

Unfortunately, a historical moment like in Christianity in the West, where you had to separate the Church from the State has not occurred in Islamic history. The moment when intellectual research could be done independently of the great religious leaders has

not occurred in the countries of Islam. This is because the kind of Islam that is patronised, promoted and encouraged has to be the type that the regime feels comfortable with.

In Saudi Arabia it has to be Wahabi, nothing else. Twenty or thirty years ago when my father was studying in madhhab, he could read the text in Jawi, in the Malay language with Arabic script. Today, you couldn't find those texts in the grand mosque in Saudi Arabia any more.

In Iran, if you want to do research, if you want to evolve Islamic thought into modernity, you have to subscribe to Shi'ite dogma not Sunni. I am sure it is similar in every other Islamic country. In the past however, when Islam was growing, flourishing and prospering in Baghdad, Damascus and in Cairo the freedom to search, investigate, reason and rationalise was extremely open. This was because the leaders at that time supported the full spectrum of Islamic studies, cultures and civilisations.

I talk about the great scholars of the past, who studied Greek wisdom, and passed it on to the Christian fathers. This became the seeds of development into the industrial revolution, science, technology and into the powers that led the West back into the East in the form of colonialism. I think it is time to complete the loop.

My suggestion is that the West, the Muslim countries and the Muslim people should get together and transfer what has been achieved, developed and innovated in the West, back into the Muslim world. This will enable them to obtain their own renaissance so that they can practice the science and technology within their own confines. They can serve as the engines for their own growth and development into modernity. We can't ignore them - 1.5 billion of them. If you leave them behind, frustrated, hopeless and bitter like in Afghanistan, like in other places, they will become a source of instability.

What happened on September 11 gave us quite a lesson. That was the first major global event that was experienced in real time, everywhere, in every time zone, by Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus around the world. That technology is in our hands. We have to help each other to grow into a more open and egalitarian global society. The way to do this is through human resource development, education and completing that loop back into the Muslim World.

The kind of research and studies that needs to be done is particularly difficult. How do you come up with Islamic political theory that would point to life in the age of globalisation, the age of openness everywhere? You can't do it with the regimes looking behind your shoulders telling scholars not to deviate, not to bring any outside elements or their own ideas into that kind of theory, that kind of thinking.

This is my message to you here at the Australia National University. Research on Islamic studies can be done and done effectively outside of the Muslim world by Muslims and by others. Oxford University has just established a Centre for Islamic Studies. Harvard has had one for some time. There are also centres in Chicago and Princeton. And they are

staffed by great scholars from the Muslim world, from Pakistan, from India, from Saudi Arabia, from Kuwait, from everywhere. They cannot do the research themselves in their own societies in their own countries or universities because they are limited in their investigation.

A university like this one, a Centre for Democratic Institutions like this and other great centres of learning around the world can help. Complete that loop. Train Islamic students, scholars and Muslims in all the fields of your sciences and your technology - including Islamic studies so that they can help propel their own society into this era of globalisation where we cannot stand apart or live in isolation anymore. It is an age that John Donne visualised over 300 years ago, that 'no man is an island entire of itself. No woman is an island entire of herself'. Not even Australia. Every man's death, every woman's suffering, every child's hunger, everyone's illiteracy and ignorance also diminishes me, affects me and affects every one of us.

Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls - this bell of democracy, openness and humanity - it tolls for thee, for all of us in this room, for all of us in this region and for all of us in this world. I think we have to help each other.

Fundamentalism of any religion poses a deep problem. You can be a Jewish fundamentalist, a Hindu fundamentalist, a Christian fundamentalist and you can be a Muslim fundamentalist. They all have to be brought into the light. They all have to be brought into the open.

For so long humanity has lived in the cave, as Plato describes it, we live with symbolism, with our prejudices, our faith and our beliefs that could be rooted way back in myths in the past and in the old ages. Now with technology, science and the capacity that we have, I think we are capable of walking out of the cave. We live with certain stereotypes of each other. We have ideas about certain cultures, ideologies, religions and types. These stereotypes might portray a particular group by saying it cannot change, it cannot be democratic, it cannot progress and it cannot diversify. That is cave thinking. In the thousands of years since Plato, surely humanity should walk out of the cave and allow the light to shine. It will take all our effort to get there, to help each other, to bridge the gap.

I think the Muslims are just like any other human beings, aspiring to move forward but frustrated by the present circumstances that they find themselves in. I think you should feel sympathy with some of the problems they are facing.

With all the power at our disposal in the world, somehow we could not solve the problems of the Palestinians. With all the powers we have we could not solve the problems of backwardness and of illiteracy not only in the Muslim world, but also in many other places.

In the age of globalisation, if I may borrow from Rudyard Kipling:

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
Tho they come from the ends of the earth!

In the age of globalisation there's no Christendom, no Islamic world, no east, no west, no south, no north. You don't come from the ends of the earth, you come from neighbouring regions and countries.

Australia is not the end of the earth. You are next to everybody else. Everybody else is just hours away. Therefore help each other. Help the Muslims attain their own true renaissance. The road to that renaissance that many of them are aspiring for is openness and democracy. You, here in Australia, not at the end of the earth, contiguous to all of us, can help.

Thank you very much.

[applause]

ROLAND RICH:

Well thank you very much Dr Surin for such a thoughtful, erudite and masterly presentation. And what's more, you had to compete with the one thing we didn't think about that might happen in the course of this annual address - that there would be a such a stubborn piece of lawn right outside our window that would need persistent mowing for a full hour.

Dr Surin, thank you very much for your comment. Dr Surin has agreed to respond to questions for perhaps 10 or 15 minutes, and I think after all the issues that have been raised, no doubt quite a few will come to mind.

Let me open the floor to questions. Dr Surin will return to the stage. Perhaps as Chairman, I might actually jump in the queue here and ask one myself. Because one of the issues that we think about in terms of religion and democracy is in the way modern democracies are structured, we tend to think of them as secular.

Yesterday you spoke to us about a fascinating episode where, in the new Constitution, it was decided that Buddhism would not be the State religion of Thailand, because democracy required a secular context.

My question is what is your vision for the Islamic religious leaders in a secular democracy?

DR SURIN:

The word secularism means different things to different people. For a minority in Thailand we wish that secularism is the only way for us, otherwise we couldn't survive.

However I think for the countries with a Muslim majority, in the initial process of opening up to democratisation, secularism may still be a word they are not quite ready for, that is not quite welcome.

Somehow the society, the leadership of the State and the Ulama, the religious leaders, should transfer some of the individual freedom and liberty to make judgement on some of the issues back to the people, as it used to be - issues of religious rituals, issues of daily life.

For a long time throughout history it has remained the exclusive domain of the religious leadership. Therefore the country, government and leadership maintain strict control on all those ritualistic questions and issues.

I think to move forward into democracy the realm of individual freedom and liberty will have to be expanded. That will have to be negotiated. Each society, each country, each

Islamic community will have to find its own way and decide how much liberty and freedom individuals can exercise and entertain.

In Malaysia, Indonesia and southern Thailand we have less control from the religious leadership.

Well Indonesia, rather than having Islam as the State religion, they have the State ideology called Pancasila – including the belief in one God - and every major religion in Indonesia believes in one God. Everybody, every religion can subscribe to that. However I think some countries, traditional countries and countries in the heartland of Islam would find it difficult to accept the term 'secular'.

Turkey has gone through that, through tremendous commotion, but it has taken almost a century to go through. It is a working democracy, but it is not yet fully effective.

I think rather than saying that you have to have secularism in order to have a democracy, for some of the Muslim countries I think you can say first expand the realm of freedom of individuals and then let the dynamics of the society and of the community move forward so that it can evolve.

In the past we have not had experimentation on that. It has been stifled. Individual judgement on any issue has been clamped down. You have to listen to the Imam; you have to listen to government opinion on those kinds of issues. So I think just opening up the process a little bit and letting it move, there will be give and take and interaction within the system and gradually this will lead to greater freedom. It's not going to be resolved tomorrow and no individual can give one answer to solve the whole problem. It has got to be a collective effort.

QUESTION:

I am a lecturer at the Thai Department, Department of Defence, and I have two questions.

Actually, one is my own thought which I would like you comment on. If you talk the movie language there is, it seems, two groups - the goodies and the baddies. I feel frustrated as a Muslim because Muslims are portrayed as baddies and I would like you to comment on this.

The second one is the question. If you were to be positioned by the Thai government to bring the Muslim community - especially in the four provinces in Thailand - to come close to the democratic constitution, what would be your quick answers to the five steps in obtaining this probably in 10 years?

DR SURIN:

Let me take the second question first. My answer is education, education, education. In southern Thailand there used to be a belief that to learn Thai, to speak Thai was haram, forbidden by Islam. Luckily my grandfather changed his mind and sent me to a Buddhist school – a primary school - and that is how changes took place.

Every electoral campaign I fought I would draw people out and say 'I have done it, I have made it. The road is open and you can do it too'. So education, education, education is the answer.

There are a lot of prejudices; there are a lot of reservations about education in conservative Muslim societies. That is why education at the bottom and education at the top are both so important. I asked Dr Ashton Calvert, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, what happens to the Colombo plan in Australia. He said it is still going strong. My suggestion is to open it up further, expand it and increase it. Your close neighbour has a population of 200 million. Let us open our classroom for human resource developments. They will be the agents of change in their own society. They will be the messengers of peace and reconciliation in that society.

First question - I travel in Europe often and since September 11, even now, still experiencing it, I asked for a Muslim meal. Flying from Geneva to Frankfurt they gave me a Muslim meal. My neighbours have normal meals. I open up my meal - they gave me plastic knife, plastic fork and plastic spoon. The other passengers have metal utensils. I asked the stewardess on the plane, "Why give me a plastic knife?" She said naively: "Oh, it's a Muslim meal" [laughs]. That is still going on in Europe.

We are under scrutiny; we are under pressure and tremendous attention. Luckily my name is Surin Pitsuwan, not Abdul Halim bin Ismael as I was born, otherwise I would have faced more problems in Europe and in America.

However we cannot blame the people around the world for having that kind of attitude. We have to help educate them. There are people who are moderate, peaceful, open, and kind. They are not bent on violence or destruction. This is what we have to do together. It won't be my mission alone. It won't be your mission alone. It will take more than two in this kind of situation to tango and that means every one of us.

That is why I think when you meet violence with violence in Afghanistan, in Iraq, or anywhere else, potentially you will solve the problem only temporarily. You will increase the tension even more in the future unless, and until, you address the problems at the very root cause of it - lack of development, lack of education, lack of progress, lack of opportunities, lack of knowledge, lack of science and lack of technology.

It is a long-term process, but it is the only process that we have. We just cannot walk away from this obligation, this responsibility. We just have to help each other. At the

end of the process posterity will look back and say thank you very much, they thought about that in Canberra back in 2003. But it has to begin.

I can assure you that there are partners; there are emerging leaders in the Muslim world who are ready to work with and cooperate with the West. However it will require your hand to be extended to them and they will come. They will learn and they will become your partners in progress and in democracy. We have to begin somewhere.

QUESTION:

I am from the Asian Studies Faculty here at ANU. In recent years, Dr Surin, we heard quite a bit about what was described as Asian values - these were put forward, by some of the leaders. I think the names associated with the set of arguments are usually given as Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir. I would be interested in your comment on how the Asian values debate connects with the set of ideals surrounding democratic values.

DR SURIN:

Well I think at certain stages of the development of certain cultures and societies you will have to go through steps and processes. We take it as democracy; I take it as truth that men and women are created equal. The fundamental principle of democracy is that you have certain inalienable rights.

But then we have to think about those leaders, those governments that need to bring the entire population forward with them in the direction of their vision. They have problems, they face problems. Some of the people are dragging their feet, not wanting to come along. Each society, each state and each democracy will have to somehow devise a system of values that would fit the circumstances that they happen to be in.

I think Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Mr Mahathir are democratic in their aspirations, but they have to deal with reality in their own societies, and they have to defend the system facing pressure and criticism from outside.

I think it is not right to assume that all value systems of all humanity should be made the same at the same time. You have to allow for the process of evolution. After all if you read, you know, the great texts of democracy, they are different.

If you read Thomas Hobbes it is security, security, security. The emphasis is on one person and on property. If you read John Locke then it is the rights of the individual more than anything else. The right to the fruits of your labour, rights to your private property and how to construct a society that will protect that. If you read Rousseau then it is freedom, freedom, freedom. But if you read the Federal Papers in America, if you read Jefferson it would be different sets of values, of priorities, that would inform and transform your societies.

After the end of the Cold War we have democracy, democracy, democracy. Yet some areas and some societies are falling behind. They are not at the level of universal values of freedom, equality, rights and liberty.

I think we have to allow for diversity. If we can accept the Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir notion of their own cultural political values, then we have an even longer way to go to understand the Muslims in their setting. That's my point.

We have layers and shades of differences in the same thing that we are talking about. We just have to be open, compassionate and kind in our interaction, cooperation and our relations. We have to move along the thinking that in the end none can be left behind. If some are left behind, they will become problems for all of us. In this age of globalization nobody is far from anybody any more. Anybody's problems are no longer exclusive. This is demonstrated by recent events, including SARS by the way.

Thank you very much.

ROLAND RICH:

And that draws to a close the 2003 address. May I express my gratitude to all of you for taking a little bit of time out of your busy schedules and joining us today. Thank you very much, and perhaps once again for such an excellent speech, could we thank Dr Surin.