2026 Surin Pitsuwan Oration: In memory of Dr Surin Pitsuwan

Dr. Fuadi Pitsuwan, President of Surin Pitsuwan foundation and Lecturer, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University.

You probably wonder given what's going on in ASEAN and the world what our region would look like today if my late father—and other great personalities who helped shape this region—were still around.

Friends of my late father's, colleagues, younger generations of scholars who may not know my late father personally, and members of the ASEAN community—

I am speaking here as his eldest son, and I feel both deeply honored and a profound sense of weight at the same time. Many of you knew him as a diplomat, a scholar, a former Secretary-General of ASEAN. I knew him simply as "Baba"—a man who believed, perhaps stubbornly at times, that Southeast Asia could be better than it was, and better than we often allowed it to become.

He passed away in November, 2017, before he could board a flight to Singapore, where he had planned to speak about the struggles of the Rohingya people. That unfinished journey has stayed with me. It was not just another speaking engagement—it was part of a lifelong commitment to speak for those whose voices are too easily ignored. And I often wonder what he would have said on the current trajectory of not only our region, but the world.

Because if he were here today, I suspect he would be deeply troubled.

He may not have said it outright—and would likely have expressed it with his usual diplomacy—but he would have been deeply disappointed, profoundly so, by the fracturing of the ASEAN Community. By the deadlock that continues to define our response to the crisis in Myanmar. By the persistence of tensions in the region, including what we have seen in Thailand–Cambodia relations. And perhaps most of all, by the growing sense among young people that ASEAN no longer speaks to them, no longer represents their hopes or their future—that it is increasingly seen as prioritizing state interests over the interests of its people.

And I say this not to criticize, but to reflect honestly—because that is what he taught me to do.

I sometimes joke—though there is more truth than humor in it—that when the founding fathers of ASEAN, and the leaders who followed, came together to build this regional project, they forgot one thing. They built institutions, they drafted declarations, they spoke of community—but they never quite fixed the history of animosity between our states, or among their peoples.

We tried to move forward without fully reconciling the past. And today, we are still living with that unfinished work.

My father understood that regionalism is not just about cooperation—it is about trust. And trust cannot be declared; it must be built, patiently, honestly, and sometimes uncomfortably.

He also believed in something that was not always popular in our region: the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P. He understood well that the idea would be resisted—perhaps even rejected outright. Yet he advocated for it, worked to socialize it, and would still be pushing for it today if he were with us—not because he expected immediate success, but because he believed that even achieving half of that vision would still be a meaningful step forward.

At the same time, we must also be honest about the world we are entering. We are witnessing a moment where the language of “interference” is sometimes used as a justification for removing leaders who are seen as antithetical to the interests of powerful states. Where R2P risks becoming, in practice, not a responsibility to protect people, but a responsibility shaped by the interests of those individuals with power.

And yet, even with that reality, I believe—he believed—that we must not abandon the principle itself. We must hold on to the belief that it can, and should, be about humanity. That it can still serve as a moral compass, even when its application falls short.

For him, progress was not about perfection. It was about movement—however incremental—toward a more humane and responsible regional order.

At the core of his thinking was a deep belief in multilateralism. Not as an abstract principle, but as a lived reality. He believed that global ideas only matter when they are made meaningful through regional arrangements—through institutions like ASEAN that can translate ideals into action that people can actually feel.

But for that to happen, ASEAN itself must evolve.

I hope that one day we will have the courage to revisit—and even trigger—Article 50 of the ASEAN Charter, which calls for a review of the Charter five years after its adoption, so that we may open the door to revising and strengthening our commitments. Not only to codify what is politically convenient, but to enshrine what is morally necessary.

And yes, perhaps that means rethinking one of ASEAN’s most sacred principles—the principle of non-interference. Not abandoning it, but refining it—allowing for carefully defined qualifications and exceptions, so that when human dignity is at stake, silence is no longer our default response. Ideas such as an ASEAN Standby Force, a principle of non-indifference, an ASEAN Human Rights Court, an ASEAN-minus-X approach to political issues, and global norms like R2P and human security should continue to be explored, developed, and socialized—both among ourselves and with those in positions of power.

Because if ASEAN is to remain relevant, especially to the younger generation, it cannot be seen as an organization that merely manages problems. It must be one that has the courage to confront them.

Allow me to end on a more personal note.

One of my last conversations with my father was not about ASEAN, or diplomacy, or politics—but about philosophy. I said to him, perhaps a bit provocatively, that thinkers like Ibn Rushd, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas—figures who tried to reconcile reason and faith within the Abrahamic traditions—might, in some sense, have been atheists. That perhaps they believed so deeply in harmony and unity within society that they sought to rationalize and blend these traditions, even when tensions seemed irreconcilable.

He paused, smiled slightly, and said, “You’re probably right.”

What stayed with me was not whether we were right or wrong—but the spirit of that exchange. The willingness to question. To challenge assumptions, to challenge your own identity and belief. And yet, at the same time, to search for ways to preserve harmony.

And so, to all of you here—many of whom were his friends, his colleagues, his companions on this long journey, I hope we continue to question the status quo, as he did. Let us not be afraid to ask difficult questions about ASEAN, about our region, about ourselves.

But at the same time, let us also carry forward that deeper commitment—to unity, to dialogue, to harmony. To finding ways, however imperfect, to bring people together.

Because in the end, that is what my father believed in most.

Not just ASEAN as an institution—but ASEAN as a promise.

A promise that we must now decide, together, whether we are still willing to keep.

Thank you very much.