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SPEECH FOR MR LAWRENCE WONG, ACTING MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH AT THE LAUNCH OF MALAY LANGUAGE MONTH (BULAN BAHASA) 2013 ON SATURDAY 7 SEPTEMBER AT THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Senior Minister of State and Chairman of the Malay Language Council

Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Chairman of the Bulan Bahasa Organising Committee and MP for Chua Chu Kang GRC

Mr Ong Yew Huat, Chairman, National Heritage Board

Mrs Lee Suet Fen, Chairman, Asian Civilisations Museum

Parliamentary Colleagues

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I'm very happy to be here with you for the launch of this year's Bulan Bahasa. This is truly an excellent showcase of Malay language and culture by all the artists and performers. Let me congratulate Masagos and Zaqy for putting together this year's excellent programme. And I would also like to recognise all the young people who are immersing themselves in Bahasa

Melayu. Let's give them all another round of applause for their wonderful performances.

2. One of Singapore's key strengths is that of a vibrant, multicultural society. We may all come from different backgrounds, but over the decades, we have come together to build a united people, sharing common values and beliefs. We are all Singaporean, but we also retain our ethnic heritage – we are also Malays, Indians and Chinese.

3. Our mother tongues are a key component of this rich ethnic heritage. Indeed, oral traditions, teachings and proverbs are best transmitted in mother tongue; they lose their nuances when taught in English.

4. Knowledge of our mother tongues gives us a sense of our Asian identity and roots. It enables us to appreciate and understand who we are and where we came from. It opens up a whole world of art, culture and traditions, which spans thousands of years of civilisation. If we use only English, and allow our mother tongue to degenerate, we will, in time, lose our values and cultural heritage. The nature of our society will change for the worse.

5. Nowadays, because of the common use of English at work and in schools, younger Singaporeans are increasingly more comfortable in English than in their mother tongues. More and more families are also using English at home. So the community must work together to reach out to all groups of Malay-speakers – encourage them to stay in touch with Malay, and keep the language alive in our society.

6. And this is indeed what is happening. The number of groups and individuals contributing to this two-day festival alone shows the importance the community places on promoting the Malay language. We even have with us for the first time Madrasah Aljunied and NIE conducting tours here at the ACM on Malay culture – in Malay, of course.

7. I am also pleased to note that playwright Aidli Alin Mosbit, singer Siti Zahidah Fadil, LionsXII Captain Shahril Ishak and Nurul Aini from Suria are joining us as Language Ambassadors. I'm glad that these passionate individuals have decided to step up and share their love for the language with the community. I am sure that they will find new and creative ways to inspire young Malays.

8. Promoting Malay is not just a month-long task; we must create an environment conducive for the Malay language to flourish. All of us can play our part as individuals. In our respective homes, we can create that same conducive environment for bilingualism. In fact, the home environment is the most important factor in learning a language, and parents are the most influential role models for their children. Parents who speak to their children regularly in Malay will give them a solid foundation at an early age, which they can build on when they need to later in life. So make an effort to speak the language with your children, nieces and nephews. Bring them to Malay language activities, and now you make use of the newly launched Gerbang Bahasa app to engage them.

9. In short, the responsibility to preserve and promote the Malay language does not reside solely with the Malay Language Council. The community must agree that this is something worth doing, and come together to support it. So, I would like to thank all the partners and community leaders for joining us today and giving the Council your full support.

10. I have focussed today on Malay, as this is the launch of the Malay Language Month. But, in fact, the Chinese and Indian communities also face similar concerns in the learning and speaking of their mother tongues. Each ethnic community

wants to retain its culture, language and its links to its roots. Ultimately, it is these roots and values that give Singapore our diversity, identity and unique strength. Being bilingual in our mother tongues allows us to flourish as an open, cosmopolitan society, without losing our Asian heritage and roots. So we should all continue to work hard to nurture these special traits that characterise our multi-racial and multi-religious society.

11. Finally, in the spirit of the launch, allow me to share a pantun specially written by the Council for this occasion.

Pantun Warisan

Taman nan indah tempat bertemu,
Bebunga mawar merata-rata;
Baliklah tuan membawa ilmu,
Junjunglah bahasa warisan bangsa.

Poem for Heritage [English Translation]

*This beautiful garden is the place to meet,
Where roses bloom in its midst;
Everyone brings home a bounty of knowledge,
To uphold and preserve our language and heritage.*

12. On that note, I wish you all the best for the Bulan Bahasa, and wish everyone a pleasant evening ahead. Terima kasih.