

**Speech by Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of  
Foreign Affairs,  
at the SMCCI Inaugural Malay/Muslim Business Conference 2011 Dinner,  
on Wednesday, 20 April 2011 at 8pm, Orchard Hotel, Singapore**

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Mr. Abdul Rohim Sarip, President, SMCCI

Dato Mohd Zain Abdullah, Immediate Past President, SMCCI

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. It gives me great pleasure to be invited here this evening as the guest-of-honour for the inaugural Malay Muslim Business Conference dinner.
2. I would like to extend my warmest greetings to all the distinguished participants who have gathered here for this event and at the same time, congratulate the SMCCI organizing committee and secretariat for making this inaugural event a success.
3. The theme of today's conference is globalising SMEs. Hence, I wish to share some of my own thoughts on the current developments in the international business environment for our Malay and Muslim business community. Since the beginning of this year, the global economy was shaken by the developments in the Middle East and North Africa region.
4. The MENA region has been one of the key regions of interests for the Singapore Malay and Muslim business community for the last half a decade. Many, within both the government and business community, were very surprised by the speed things unfold within the MENA region.
5. Most of us could not believe how a desperate act by a young underprivileged man in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, triggered off a region wide series of protests and unrests that rocked throughout the entire North Africa and Arab world in just a matter of 3 months.
6. The "Jasmine revolution" that started off Tunisia was primarily spearheaded by the disgruntled young populations of the various Arab countries. These youths were angry with their leaders for their failure to address employment issues, rising food costs, social income equity, political freedom and in some countries human rights concerns.

7. This movement subsequently brought down the past government of Tunisia and Egypt and led to a civil war in Libya. It has spread like wildfire to the rest of the Arab world affecting most of the countries such as Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and Syria. The extent of unrest differs in each country. Some are calling for the leaders to step down, others are pressing for greater reforms. Only a handful of countries remained relatively unscathed.

8. The immediate impact to the Singapore economy and the greater global economy was the significant increase in oil prices that has threatened to derail the global economic recovery should the rise remain unabated. As things unfold in the MENA region, the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami occurred in Japan, one of our closest friend and trade partner, causing unprecedented destruction and losses in human life.

9. However, it is important for businesses, particularly that of SMEs, not be bogged down by the immediate developments and allow short term issues to cloud their judgement of longer term business prospects in the global markets.

10. For example, many of the Arab governments took immediate actions to address what they have identified as some of the root causes of the problems. In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah announced a series of benefits for citizens and public spending package amounting to SAR485 billion. In the case of Japan, the Japanese government and citizens could also spend up to US\$300 billions dollars for the purpose of reconstruction of homes, factories and public infrastructure which would in turn spur new consumption for both capital and consumer goods. Undoubtedly, some of these increased spending and policy changes could potentially translate to new business opportunities for Singaporean firms.

11. Hence it proves that in times of crisis, there could always be underlying opportunities for one to tap on so long as the entrepreneur remains vigilant and not shut his or her mind off from fear of unknown.

12. Instead, you can monitor the market carefully and learn how to capitalise opportunities quickly when the window remains open. At the same time, safeguard your own position by managing risks exposure. For SMEs, there is always a tendency for internal capabilities to be less developed compared to larger counterparts.

13. This is only natural part of growing up and can be overcome; so long as one is committed to acquiring new business capabilities in understanding the market needs and incorporate such knowledge into product development, marketing, operations, and supported by sound financial and risks management policies. Given the pace of change in the global business environment, one must also constantly upgrade these strategic capabilities to remain competitive and relevant.

14. Another important area which business people must pay due attention is the new new media...the internet business and beyond. To share with you some statistics:

15. In 2010 alone, 9 out of 10 internet users visited a social networking website during their time spent online. (Comscore, 2011). Research in 2011 revealed that 1 out of every 8 minutes online is spent on Facebook. (Comscore, 2011). Twitter shares more than 140 million "Tweets" on any given day. Every minute, 35 hours of video footage is uploaded to YouTube. Internet users spend 3 times as many consecutive minutes reading blogs and navigating social networking sites than they do reading emails. (Nelson Company, 2010)

16. The benefits of the Internet and its endless possibilities and boundless advantages to commerce and trade are clear.

17. Communication is the key of the Internet's success and its potential speed to carry information across continents in seconds. To business people, this means now the 'world is the market' - global opportunities at their fingertips. The Internet is definitely the marketing medium of the future (and present, for that matter). It can help to engage potential clients through interactive tools like videos and photos. For businesses struggling with the downturn in the economy often the Internet can provide new ways to market their products and services. The Internet is a medium for smart marketing, especially, for SMEs.

18. Not a business person myself, I sought views from a friend who have found the internet a boon to business. He is none other than our dynamic and refreshing Abang Abu. He told me that in his business as a motivator/trainer in financial literacy, he uses social media channels to empower his students and trainees. He said: Social media channels have rapidly gained dominance in the internet world. With each passing year, internet users are spending an increased amount of time on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. It is alarming just how dominating and dynamic these social media websites can do for the business world". He was, however also realistic about the new media when he said that the main disadvantage of the Internet is the need to continuously invest "time" to keep track and conduct follow-up actions on the business activities, without which their strategies of using the Internet will fail.

19 He said he needs to be driven by working to remain as current as possible with the latest technologies and trends. The Internet world keeps him wanting to "continue to reinvent" himself. Isn't that promising?

20. Bang Abu has derived amazing benefits from internet marketing. He has started to leverage internet marketing to market my services as well products to all part of the world. Now he has customers from US, UK, Europe, and well other Asian countries.

21. He has developed new products and services because of Internet marketing, like his e coaching services, ebooks, DVDs. And all this does not require a lot of money to produce, in fact some does not even a single cent spend for it.

22. This new media has also allowed him to do a program for the masses, like what he did in "Simpan Challenge", a saving programme for the community, done solely using internet. More than 900 people participated and benefitted from it.

23. Social Network like FB clearly has brought branding beyond business for Abang Abu. He has gathered so many friends ("followers") from all over the world who had invited him to speak in many places, This network had brought him on a paid speaking tour to many people from India, Chennai, Bombay, Paris, Melbourne and Perth as well Malaysia and Brunei too.

24. If you think AA (Abang Abu) is an established name, let me share with you another more modest example of a housewife who made good through the new media.

25. She is Shareah Mokhtar, or better known as Super Mom. She believes that the SMCCI-inspired "Cabaran 101010" on the facebook has helped her to profile her business. Allow me to let her tell you her story herself, and I quote:

"Ok, thank God for the internet. Eversince quitting my lucrative career I tried various freelance works because I still have bills to pay. It was even tougher than working fulltime. There were instances when clients don't pay you and don't pay you enough. I decided to do conventional business (nothing to do with my passion) but ultimately they failed maybe due to my lack of business knowledge.

3 years ago when I nearly lost my life giving birth to Aini, I realised I have this special gift hence I should focus more on that. My sister started Facebook (I was totally ignorant of the internet world) and I started drawing caricatures of friends for free. I just wanted to draw again and finally be ME.

Words got around and FB friends became 1570 now. Enquiries of orders started to come in and hey.... I don't have to meet up but I got paid! All in the net! Transfer of completed caricature files means transfer of money in my bank... cool! I can even design t-shirts and get paid! Hence why getting fatter and fatter.... hehehehe

Now I was told I can go global and I have not tried yet. People keep on saying if you have paypal, people in the US can order my caricatures. Now SuperMom and SuperApek will go global!hehehe"

26. Shariah said she is so excited about it because she believes she can finally prove to her father that his daughter can make it without a fulltime job with her God-given gifted hand!

27. She hopes to inspire other Supermoms that they can also do it. Focusing on her passion have made her do stuff beyond her wildest dreams, she said. She also hopes that her passion will bring her places, go global and make her comic books SuperMom and SuperApek a reality, insyaAllah.

28. Finally, another aspect that should not be neglected for our business people is corporate social responsibility. Whilst you as managers are busy acquiring new businesses and new capabilities, it is also important to be socially responsible and incorporate the right values in the conduct of business. You will notice a high degree of similarity between Islamic doctrines and principles highlighted in the field of CSR. Therefore, CSR is compatible and applicable to Muslim and Malay businesses. CSR is not only about doing good but doing the right thing. Increasingly, you will notice that businesses and consumers are being more demanding and discerning as education level improves and information flow more freely. Therefore, if applied wisely at the strategic level, the combination of being Halal and socially responsible could transform into a source of competitive advantage for your business, particularly in that of Islamic markets.

29. SMCCI has shown that it has leadership qualities that have evolved over time. It has become more professional. The profile of its leadership has also become diversified. As the Malay Muslim community progresses, especially in the field of business and economic development, the community will growingly look to the Chamber as one important source of leadership. I am confident the SMCCI will live up to that expectation.

30. Last but not least, I would like to urge all of you to utilise platforms such as this event more frequently, as this offers a cost effective way to exchange ideas, to keep current on new opportunities and management practice and meet people to forge partnerships to strengthen your supply chain for venturing into new markets.

31. Thank you very much and have an enjoyable dinner.

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