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**SPEECH BY MR HENG SWEE KEAT, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION,
AT THE CEREMONY COMMEMORATING THE RENAMING OF THE
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES (ISEAS) AS ISEAS –
YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE, 12 AUGUST 2015**

Puan Noor Aishah and Family,

Ministers,

Your Excellencies,

Professor Wang Gungwu, Chairman, ISEAS

Board Members,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Thank you for coming today to honour our first president, Encik Yusof Ishak, and to mark the achievements of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).
2. Glad to share this special occasion with family, friends, supporters and admirers – both of Encik Yusof and of ISEAS.

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YUSOF ISHAK– A PRESIDENT FOR ALL SINGAPOREANS

3. We just celebrated our 50th National Day, an emotional day when all of us committed ourselves anew to the principles of unity, justice, and equality that our pioneer leaders like Encik Yusof made their life's work. I wish Encik Yusof and his fellow pioneers who have left us could be here with us, to see how we are living up to their vision for Singapore. I am very happy that Puan Noor Aishah, and Dr Imran and his wife Zarina can join us today.

4. Last year, PM announced in the National Day Rally that we would honour Encik Yusof, an outstanding pioneer, in three ways:
 - a. We would name the new mosque in Woodlands Masjid Yusof Ishak;

 - b. We would create the Yusof Ishak Professorship in Social Sciences in NUS; and,

 - c. We would rename ISEAS to the ISEAS –Yusof Ishak Institute.

5. It is deliberate that we choose to honour Encik Yusof through institutions that allow our people to grow in spirit and in knowledge, for Encik Yusof was a religious man, committed to learning and progress.

6. Since then, the community has rallied to honour Encik Yusof. We are about 2 weeks away from our next National Day Rally, and I am very happy that, with today's ceremony, we realise all three forms of honour to Encik Yusof.
 - a. In March, we broke ground for the Masjid Yusof Ishak. Minister Yaacob, SPS Hawazi, and Puan Noor Aishah, you were there. We have since completed the foundational work for the mosque, and anticipate that it will be ready by the end of next year. Minister Yaacob told me that response from the community has been overwhelming. I understand we have collected more than \$3 million in donations for the mosque. It's great to see the community come together so enthusiastically.

- b. Earlier this month, amidst the Hari Raya festivities, Minister Yaacob announced that the fund-raising committee for the Yusof Ishak Professorship in Social Sciences has raised \$3.87 million, almost two thirds of its \$6 million target. Our thanks go to the generous contributors. NUS will appoint the first Yusof Ishak Professor soon. The Yusof Ishak Professor will enhance our understanding and appreciation of subjects like ethnicity and multi-culturalism.
 - c. Even now, Encik Yusof continues to bring our people together.
 - d. Now, today, on the day Encik Yusof would have turned 105 years old, a few days after Singapore turned 50, it is our great honour to name the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, in honour of Encik Yusof, a pioneer leader and a president for all Singaporeans.
7. In fact, the preparation for today's ceremony started some time back. Before PM's announcement, Minister Yaacob and I called on Puan Noor Aishah to present these proposals to her, and to

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seek her views. Puan Noor Aishah received us most graciously, listened to us, and gave us her warmest blessings.

8. Thank you, Puan Noor Aishah, for your support and your gentle guidance. As a young wife and mother, you served our fledgling nation by Encik Yusof's side. Today, you continue to share your late husband's name and spirit with all of us, to inspire and rally all of us behind the principles he stood for.

9. During our visit, Puan Noor Aishah shared with us what it was like for her to enter the Istana by her husband's side as a very young lady. In those days, everything was a first for every Singaporean. Encik Yusof Ishak, Puan Noor Aishah and other pioneers had to figure many things out for the first time, like how best to represent Singapore to the world, how to uphold the dignity of a new nation, how to bring people of diverse cultures and backgrounds together.

**YUSOF ISHAK – A PRESIDENT COMMITTED TO A SINGAPORE FOR ALL
SINGAPOREANS**

10. Encik Yusof became our Yang di-Pertuan Negara in 1959. Throughout his tenure, Singapore faced existential crises on many

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fronts — transitioning out of colonial rule, navigating tenuous relationships with neighbouring countries, dealing with merger, and then sudden nationhood just a few years later, when he became our first president. This was accompanied by a surging population from diverse sources, internal racial unrest, and economic and infrastructural challenges. Survival of our state was far from assured.

11. At a time like that, what does it say of Encik Yusof that he chose to stay in Singapore, to lead a new country that many thought would fail, rather than return to Malaysia? It says that he believed in Singapore — he believed in the ideals and principles on which Singapore was founded.

12. Encik Yusof believed strongly in modernisation and multiculturalism — that as Singapore continued to seek economic progress, our people should also grow together to become a nation of “one united people”. Encik Yusof’s commitment to the vision of Singapore as a progressive, meritocratic, and multicultural society anchored him here.

13. Let me share some of Encik Yusof's words: "Bahawa berbagai bahasa, agama dan keturunan kaum itu (boleh menjadi) sebagai satu batu penghalang terhadap kemajuan dan kemakmuran. Sebaliknya pula, kalau kita menghadapi segala perbezaan ini dengan rasa muhibah dan sikap sabar dan ingin mempelajari perbezaan akhirnya kelak akan menjadi matlamat kita yang terjamin. Antara lain-lain, sikap sabar inilah yang menjadikan Singapura sebuah kota raya yang dinamik dan maju hari ini."¹

14. You see, Encik Yusof did not see our diversity of race, language and religion as an obstacle to progress. He saw this as our strength. He saw this diversity as exactly what would make Singapore dynamic and progressive.

15. Listening to Puan Noor Aishah's recounting of the early days, and reflecting on Encik Yusof's life, both Minister Yaacob and I appreciated anew how fortunate we are to have had Encik Yusof

¹ The quote is from Encik Yusof's New Year Message, broadcast on 1 Jan 1968. English translation: "We in Singapore should not fall into the tragic error of viewing the variety of language, religion, culture and race as a stumbling block to progress and prosperity. On the contrary, if we approach these differences with goodwill, tolerance and healthy curiosity this rich variety will ultimately turn out to be our salvation. It is this tolerance for variety, among other things, which today makes Singapore the dynamic and progressive city it is."

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Ishak as our first president, and to have Puan Noor Aishah and their gracious family beside him.

16. For these reasons, it was an honour for me to bring the Bill before Parliament last month to rename ISEAS to the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. I said in Parliament: we are very fortunate that Encik Yusof was Singapore's Head of State at our founding moment. That he embodied our sovereignty assured all races that this would be home for all. This would not be a Chinese nation or a Malay nation or an Indian nation; this would be a Singaporean Singapore, as our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew had declared. Because our pioneer generation of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians decided to make common cause with one another, we were able to remain a multi-racial nation. As President, Encik Yusof was the living personification of the promise to make Singapore a home for all Singaporeans.

17. Senior Parliamentary Secretary Hawazi Daipi, and MPs Lim Biow Chuan, Intan Azura Mokhtar, Zaqy Mohamad, and Tan Tai Yong spoke in wholehearted support of the Bill.

18. Indeed, Mr Zaqy made the excellent suggestion that ISEAS honour Encik Yusof by leading a research project on him and highlighting his achievements and contributions to our young nation as well as the community at large. ISEAS has put together a photographic exhibition, and published a monograph, on Encik Yusof. The monograph details Encik Yusof's life and ideals amidst a backdrop of the social and cultural forces at work in the region, and highlights the impact of Encik Yusof's ideals on Singapore. I thank ISEAS for these good initiatives to honour Encik Yusof.

ISEAS: AN INSTITUTE FOR ALL OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

19. When we are secure in our own identity, when we are committed to our own diversity, then can we best live with, and grow together with, the diversity in our region, and our world.
20. Established in 1968, ISEAS was one of the first research institutes of its kind in the region. Our pioneer leaders saw that Singapore's fate was tightly intertwined with that of the region. We thrive if our neighbours thrive.

21. We believed that we should, and could, strive to make our own modest contributions to our region, through the generation of knowledge, the exchange of ideas and goodwill, and the fostering of mutual understanding and appreciation. ISEAS could be a centre for knowledge generation, building an international community of scholars on Southeast Asia, all invested in the success of our region.

22. Importantly, ISEAS was established as an independent institute with autonomy in its strategic focus and scope of study. In this way, as Professor Wang shared, ISEAS has provided insight, grown a community, and built ties of friendship and respect across our region. We can be proud of ISEAS' growth in scope and repute over the years, even as it developed its own independent identity and priorities as a think tank. We salute the foresight of our early leaders, and I am confident that ISEAS will pursue a research agenda that best serves Singapore and our region. May ISEAS, as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, continue to grow from strength to strength.

CONCLUSION

23. Let me conclude with Encik Yusof's reflections on Singapore's colonial history:

“It was then a swampy, barren island dotted with a few fishing villages. The early immigrants who came largely from China, India, Ceylon, and Indonesia were largely anonymous humble folk. But... they created a wealth which was never there and would have never been, but for their toil, sweat and suffering. In every brick, stone, and tool that makes up Singapore there is contained the effort and energies of generations of men, starting with the early immigrants. It is up to us and succeeding generations to build upon the inheritance the early immigrants and their successors have left behind.”

24. Those before Encik Yusof laid a foundation with “toil, sweat and suffering”. Encik Yusof and his fellow pioneers laid on top of that foundation... a vision – of equality, justice, harmony and strength amid diversity.

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25. As ISEAS continues in its next 50 years as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, we hope that its name will constantly call to mind all that vision – of equality, justice, harmony and strength amid diversity.

26. Thank you.