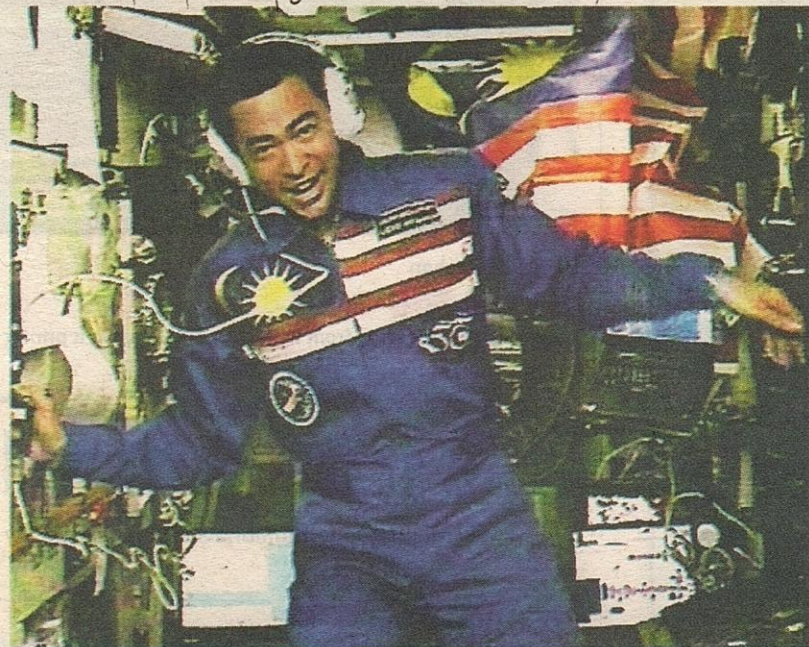


Wah! We are now a space power

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This is Earth calling: Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor speaking to Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis via a live video conferencing from the International Space Station on Monday.

YOU might not know this, but there have been a lot of unhappy rumblings in Malaysian society regarding our space programme.

Actually, that is not accurate. We don't really have a "space programme", do we? After all, it's not like we are pushing the technological frontiers and designing cutting-edge manned spacecraft.

No, to be more precise, we have an astronaut-training programme. Whoa, whoa, that is not true either. We didn't train anyone; we paid the Russians to train our astronaut.

Oh, blow it all. That is still wrong. He is not an astronaut; he is a cosmonaut. The terms, according to Nasa, mean different things but, according to the Russians (and us), they mean the same thing.

Oh, this is all so confusing. All right, all right, let us start over again.

You might not know this, but there have been a lot of unhappy rumblings in Malaysian society regarding our paying the Russians buckets of money – the amount of which the Malaysian public is not 100% sure about – to train a bloke to be a spaceman (as accurate a definition I can think of, because he is a man and he is in space).

»This wonderful achievement is being sneered at in some cynical quarters«

Yes, it is true. This wonderful achievement of the country – to find a handsome, clean-cut, healthy, intelligent fellow and pay someone else to get him into space – is being sneered at in some cynical quarters.

If you happen to be one of those people, I say to you: tsk, tsk, tsk. Where is your sense of patriotism? Where is your child-like optimism?

Going into space is a big deal. Just ask Dennis Tito and Mark Shuttleworth, two space tourists who did not have the luxury of buying Russian jet fighters to contra the costs of their cosmic flights. Coincidentally, one of the nasty things people are calling our Malaysian spaceman is "space tourist".

For your information, unlike the two gentlemen mentioned above, our spaceman is not a tourist. No, no, no. He is going to do experi-



ments, important experiments.

Apart from important experiments, he is going to be doing so much good in other ways. For example, he has opened the doors of opportunity for ordinary Malaysians. One of these days, I might go to space. To conduct experiments.

Don't laugh because it is possible, for if the good doctor has proven anything, it is that if the Government is willing to spend a bit of money, anyone can go to space. Kind of like a galactic AirAsia.

Let us not forget all those little schoolchildren who are being inspired as you read this. They are going to know that Malaysia *Boleh*.

We can do all sorts of things. We are now a space power!

The next time their school computer lab collapses, or their teachers get demoralised due to poor pay, they can tell themselves that it all does not matter because we are a space power!

Last but not least, the spaceman is going to land on earth brimming with new scientific know-how. I am sure he will be able to use this newfound knowledge to help the country.

There is a great deal of high-tech equipment around that keeps malfunctioning. The traffic lights on Jalan Universiti, Kuala Lumpur, used to have a countdown, but it doesn't work now.

And all that experience with space station to earth video conferencing will come in mighty useful in Dataran Merdeka, where the super high-tech giant TV screen broke down just when eager patriotic Malaysians gathered to watch the Soyuz rocket blast off.

So, all you naysayer types are very wrong and misguided. You should be like me and embrace our spaceman programme. Sit back and think of the glory that is "Malaysia the Space Power" while you unwrap a *Raya ketupat*.

Wait a minute; that is a great idea for a space experiment. How does unwrapping *Raya ketupats* fare in zero gravity ...?

Dr Azmi Sharom is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Malaya.