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A confident nation celebrates (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The sight and sound of a confident nation was evident everywhere as hundreds of thousands of Malaysians joined in the 40th anniversary celebrations of the country's independence today.

Parades were held in all State capitals throughout the country to commemorate the event.

In Kuala Lumpur, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and members of the Cabinet joined more than 15,000 people from all walks of life in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building to mark the occasion.

Flag-waving youths, goggle-eyed youngsters clutching tightly to their parents, picture-snapping tourists and young couples gathered as early as 7am.

At Dataran Merdeka, the strong attendance this year for the celebrations, themed Akhlak Mulia Masyarakat Jaya (Honourable Behaviour, Successful Community), seemed to be a defiant stand against the recent crisis that plagued the stock market and the ringgit.

The haze too beat a retreat for the day and fine weather spared the event from the rain that had marred celebrations in the last two years.

By 7.45am, the crowds were in place although many younger children could still be heard begging their parents to give them a ride on their shoulders for a better view.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali pulled up in front of the building earlier in the new Perodua Kancil model launched two days ago.

They joined Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, his wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Cabinet Ministers, senior government officials, the armed forces top brass and foreign diplomats at the main podium.

Cheers and cries of Merdeka greeted the prompt arrival of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah at 8am.

As the unmistakable sound of helicopter blades whipped through the air, spectators craned their necks to watch five Royal Malaysian Air Force helicopters fly past Dataran Merdeka, trailing the Jalur Gemilang and the armed forces flags behind them.

After the inspection of the guard-of-honour by Tuanku Ja'afar, who is also the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, a series of earthshaking cannon blasts officially kicked off the celebrations.

The next two hours were a blur of colourful apparel, sequins, glitter, flowers and feathers, first on Dataran Merdeka's field as some 2,000 costumed schoolchildren danced in formation, then on the road as 115 contingents marched pass, stiff with pride.

School bands, employees of major corporations, soldiers and association members turned out in brightly-coloured costumes to represent Malaysia's driving forces.

A sonic concoction of cymbals, bagpipes, bugles and drums blared, competing only with the spectators' cheers and with street sellers hawking drinks, miniature flags and whistles.

Crowd pleasers included the police's dog and mounted units, which caused both adults and children to break out into spontaneous applause as the dogs and horses capered past, alert to their masters' commands.

Flypasts and the near balletic manoeuvres by the MiG-29N jetfighters,

which streaked across the city skyline, also earned cheers and prompted two youths to whoop Merdeka as the planes zoomed overhead.

The marching contingents were brought up in the rear by a proud display of military hardware including armoured vehicles comprising Stormer armoured personnel carriers, Scorpion light tanks and South Korean Infantry Fighting Vehicles.

Youngsters seemed especially impressed and many could only manage to gawk as the heavy vehicles trundled past, whilst those who ventured a timid wave at the soldiers were rewarded with a smile.

Also making their appearance at the parade were a fleet of Perodua's new Kancil model, Petronas' Formula-1 racing car and the four-wheel-drive vehicles taking part in Silverstone's TransAfrica expedition, dubbed the Malaysian Mission of Peace.

The 40th National Day celebrations will also likely be remembered for coinciding with the death of Princess Diana, killed in an early morning car crash in Paris with her companion Dodi Al-Fayed.

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