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Finally, our own car engine

ITS time had to come. It will come sooner than later. The complete Malaysian car. The prospect of one traversing the roads looms large in the horizon now that the country has a prototype commercial engine designed, developed and built by Malaysian engineers of the national oil corporation, Petronas. Launched on Monday by the Special Functions Minister, Tun Daim Zainuddin, who represented the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the unveiling of the Petronas prototype commercial engine truly marks another major milestone in the development of the country's automotive industry. We applaud not only the 15 engineers, individually and collectively, but also Petronas for taking the initiative to develop a Malaysian engine, a development that complements and will complete the evolution of a truly indigenous car. A singular achievement by a singular group of a singular company. All three would surely be prides of the country.

The idea of developing a Malaysian car industry was part of Dr Mahathir's lofty agenda to industrialise the country. It began with the design and development and assembly of the first Malaysian car that rolled out of Proton's assembly plant in 1985. It was only one model which had many imported parts, including the heart, the engine. Since that first model, many more have been developed incorporating increasingly more locally produced parts. But the engine was foreign. The prototype commercial engine of Petronas will soon change the character of Malaysian cars.

The seeds of Petronas' initiative to launch a project to produce a commercial engine were sown in 1995 when the national petroleum corporation became the main sponsor of the Red Bull-Petronas Formula One racing team. Its objective of venturing into the expensive arena of Formula One racing was two-fold. One, to promote and position its brand name globally towards realising its vision to be a leading oil and gas multinational of choice. Two, to enhance research and development and nurture indigenous capabilities in engineering.

Petronas could not have picked a better sporting event to market its brand name and logo. For Formula One racing is, after the World Cup - the soccer version - and the Olympics, the most widely followed and watched sporting event in the world these days. Sponsorship led to partnership with Sauber, a Swiss automotive engineering technology company. Initially the joint venture fulfilled the engine needs of the Formula One racing team. It gradually led to other areas of co-operation, including the transfer of technology in designing and developing a state-of-the-art commercial engine.

Sixteen months after the launch of the commercial engine project, the prototype engine was ready. Two were installed in two different cars and tested. After another year of fine-tuning it is now launched. All that remains is commercial production of the engine. It is a 2000 cc engine. But it can be adapted and extended to a whole engine family.

What is even more significant, as Petronas chairman, Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, said at the launch, the project has made available a core group of engineers with the knowledge and skill to design, develop (and build) engines. They will become the leaders of even more professionals. Surely then the launch of the Petronas prototype commercial engine is the dawn of a new era for the country's automotive industry.

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