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People more positive and supportive

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THERE are differences in public reaction to the economic problems now facing the country compared to what happened in the mid-Eighties.

The most visible is the absence of panic. Unlike in the mid-Eighties when panic and disgruntlement reigned, the present difficulties seem to bring out some of the best in us.

While it is true that queues had developed at some branches of the smaller banks and finance companies, and some people are buying more essential goods than they would normally do in anticipation of price increases, there is no widespread sense of panic or despair.

Even attempts by some unscrupulous elements to blame the Government for the problems and to drive a wedge between the country's top leaders have not been successful.

If anything, these attempts make the majority of the people more careful and circumspect in showing their preferences for personalities and policies.

This is in no small way due to the fact that the high economic growth in the last decade has brought unsurpassed political stability and a growing sense of patriotism among the people.

It is a decade when the people think of themselves more as Malaysians than Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans or Kadazans. A time when they are driven by the spirit of 'Malaysia Boleh' (Malaysia Can).

Despite the condemnation of the foreign media and their cohorts from the East and West for his outspokenness and for being unconventional, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, remains the country's most versatile and visionary Prime Minister.

Even those who disagree with his policies and pronouncements, especially his reaction to currency trading in the wake of the speculative attacks on the ringgit and the stock market, have come to acknowledge that he holds the political trump card.

Also, unlike during the last economic crisis, Dr Mahathir is not facing a challenge to his leadership.

It is recalled that the crisis of the mid-Eighties coincided with the challenge to his leadership of Umno and the Government by the combined force of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Tan Sri Musa Hitam.