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A reflection on the millennium that was

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WHEN I was delivered into the world on July 4 1937, most parts of the Earth lay in colonial bondage. It was the the year when Japan invaded China, conquering most of the Chinese coastal areas. In Europe, Hitler was building a formidable German military machine.

Kelantan, the land of my ancestors and where I was born, was in its 28th year under British imperium. There was no school in my village, Karnpong Bandar, Pulau Chondong Kok Lanas. A primary school was built only in early 1950s.

Three years and two months later, in September 1940, London, the capital of the world's largest empire in history, was bombarded by the German blitz. In December 1941, Japan invaded Malaya and all was over by February 1942.

I was eight years old when atomic bombs were dropped on Japanese cities of iroshima and Nagasaki by the US. Japan surrendered unconditionally followed by Japanese capitulation in Malaya.

The only thing I can recall (with horror) was hearing about the vicious Sino-Malay clashes during a power vacuum, between the Japanese surrender and the arrival of the British Military Administration. The Sino-Malay atrocities could, I suppose, be blamed for the state of the post-war general lawlessness. But what excuse could there have been for the traumatic May 13 1969 race riots when there had been widespread of open Malay discontent and ramblings of Chinese dissatisfaction?

In those days only Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Musa Hitam and the writer and several others who understood Malay political anxieties and appreciated their concerns for their future and were daring enough to do something to address their fear and apprehension.

In my first term at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) Ghandi was assassinated, the Federation of Malaya replaced the hated Malayan Union and the MCKK celebrated the dawn (of future Malay political power) with kenduri (feast), a variety concert, a sketch depicting the signing of the Federation Agreement and sports.

The celebration as elsewhere in the nation was a great joy. In July the same year (1948), the Government declared a state of emergency in response to a Chinese-led communist revolt. The Malays rallied solidly behind the Government. Despite the emergency, my school life was little affected.

The emergency caused the railway service connecting Kelantan and south Malaya to be suspended and as a result, Kelantan students - much to our surprise and pleasure - were flown from Kota Baru to Penang, then by train to Kuala Kangsar. During the holidays we would take the mail train to Penang and from there flew by Malayan Airways' Dakota to Kota Baru. This went on until it was again safe to travel by train which was in early 1950s. And since the middle of 1948 I have been travelling by air for the best part of my 62 years.

In 1952, I think on February 6, King George VI died when I was in Form Three.

I remember it well because on February 5 Abdul Rahim Ismail (now vice president of Lake Club), a school contemporary and I were scheduled to be caned at the headmaster's study for being habitually late for class and preps. The acting headmaster, J. D. R. Howell, was late for the appointment, so we left. He was furious and rescheduled the caning the

next day. In the morning the sad news of King George's demise reached the school. I offered my condolences to Howell. He was surprised I did it because even then, my politics was well-known to him. He, for whatever reason, decided not to cane us; dismissed me and Rahim without as much as saying a word!

I could see even then that British rule was coming to an end faster than widely expected. The British empire disappeared as the main anchor of international order some four decades and two years ago when we became independent. It was replaced by a suffocating American imperium which today enforces its culture and unforgiving economic rules on the world. It is set to continue its supremacy and arrogance in the next century.

In 1954 I failed my Cambridge School Certificate examination as William Faulkner's "A Fable" won Pulitzer prize. Three years later I joined the Straits Times, and in 1960 I left for the US on a Congressional Fellowship, returning home 18 months later, before the Cuban missile crisis blockade started. I was and am not an egghead. So what? Academic records, especially in high or secondary schools, are not an indication of future achievement. Churchill was a wretched student. What matters most is the evidence of leadership, character and good judgement, not intellectual acumen. I went on, though late in life, to Cambridge and Harvard and I never had more than five 'O' Levels."

I have lived six decades and two years in the departing century and millennium, and had closely followed the demise of the British, French, Dutch and Japanese Empires in South-East Asia at the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet empire a decade ago. I have had triumphs and serious political setbacks. The latter caused by an ambitious man (Ghulam) who abused his power, which he could only do after my mentor, Tun Razak, died suddenly in 1976. Never had the death of a Malaysian Prime Minister caused so much national grief.

To have lived in this century which has split the atom, cloned a sheep and invented computers is a blessing and a great challenge. The Malays regained their self-esteem and self-worth following Tun Razak's New Economic Policy which was enlarged, vigorously implemented and greatly enhanced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Today's challenge is for us to make Malaysia a developed nation, to avoid becoming like some of our neighbours whose political and economic costs have and are still rising to an unacceptable level merely to continue as failed nations.

As I look back at the end of the second millennium, the world, and indeed Malaysia, have a much better idea of what they are leaving behind than what lies ahead. Yet surely the challenge of the future is to enhance what we have in place and to achieve Dr Mahathir's 2020 Vision within two decades, if possible. There is no doubt the nation needs revitalisation and new approach to meet political and economic challenges, sparing a racial undertow, where possible.

Ever since I learned to read and write I was always clear about what I wanted to do even though I now realise I will never reach my journey's destination. But others can raise hopes which can be realised - the deliverance of the Malaysian people from fear and want.

In an age when Malaysians have more options than ever, success hinges on political courage and keeping the people's support. I fear greatly at the protracted animosity between Umno and Pas, between alleged "not true believers" and presumed "true believers"; the deepening divide must be stopped before it becomes violent and bloody confrontations.

We must enlarge our social safety net, reduce income and wealth inequality, foster greater national integration to strengthen political and social cohesion.

We will be left behind if after general poverty and racial discontent of the 1960s have been left far behind, we still hesitate to be more open to the creative entrepreneurship of the Information Age.

Normally, if a political situation changes, the policies also change. I have not changed even at the dawn of the new challenging era. At least for now. Perhaps, I will, when I at last become a grandfather in late January 2000. I look forward to an economically resurgent Malaysia, the determining factor whether we will continue to live in peace and harmony.

Since the millennium arrives in Ramadan, I shall not be celebrating it but the thought of it is enough to make me happy. Besides I am all alone in New York. My wife and children, except for Fuad (in London), are spending the new year and festive time in Kuala Lumpur. I shall go to bed early that evening with a warm heart and a moist eye, wishing that all of us try to come closest to representing the best of human (and Malaysian) aspirations. If we do that, the chances are high we will achieve what we desire in the new millennium.