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Every reason for N-day joy

THE resounding cries of Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka! reverberate with as much poignancy today as it did on Aug 31, 1957, when Malaysia achieved its independence. Forty-two years on, our National Day celebration takes on an even more gratifying note as we embrace, too, our country's success in weathering the economic turmoil of the past two years. The victory over the economic crisis is all the sweeter, knowing the economic turnaround of 4.1 per cent growth for the second quarter of this year, after five straight quarters of negative growth, was achieved our way. As Sir Winston Churchill said: "... without victory there is no survival".

And if we have to defy convention again to survive as we march into the new millennium, we will continue to do so. We have to ensure the years of grind and grit we put ourselves to in the struggle for independence have not been in vain and that the rakyat continue to have a better life. The financial havoc in the region shows the ease with which decades of hard work can be wiped out in weeks.

In his National Day message, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the country's experience in handling the economic problems brought about by currency traders will help us face the challenges of the next century. The crisis also shows that a Government that has the support of the majority can maintain its independence and overcome outside pressures, although we should be vigilant against further attempts to control us. The pressure can manifest itself in different ways. But armed with efficiency and a wealth of knowledge in a world dominated by the free flow of information technology, the people can better equip themselves to stand up for their rights. In an increasingly borderless world, smaller and weaker countries too have as much a right as others to give their views on the kind of globalisation that the world needs.

From an essentially agriculture-based economy resting on the twin pillars of tin and rubber, Malaysia has since independence made a quantum leap onto the path of industrialisation. We made the transition into manufacturing after the mid-80s, moving gradually into the high-tech era in line with the times. Such is our dream that we managed to wake the world up to where we are and what we are, never for a moment doubting our own aspirations and capabilities. We have an oasis of talents to tap into, an ingenious pool that is on par with world standards in some fields. In the process, we worked hard to eradicate poverty.

Interwoven into this matrix of achievements is the need to forge unity and tolerance in the melting pot of cultures that characterises our society. Merdeka may mean different things to different people, but for those who have walked through the corridors of history and those who have learned not to take things for granted, they appreciate being able to live in peace as well as the freedom to walk without having to glance over their shoulders.

As we put our best foot forward "together into the new millennium" in line with this year's National Day theme, let us reflect on and savour the true meaning of independence. It lies not in just a show of patriotism but also in the ability to recognise what is good for the country, and to adopt and adapt what is best suited to our needs as we shape our own destiny. In turn, it reflects our own identity.

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