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Goodbye to our `annus horribilis`

Paddie Bowie

"SELAMAT Hari Raya", "Gong Xi Fa Cai", "A Happy New Year". It's that time of the year again. Different greetings, but with one and the same spirit - new beginnings, new hopes. And most of us were glad, I'm sure, to see the back of 1998. It was Malaysia's "annus horribilis" (horrible year) to use the phrase so famously coined by Queen Elizabeth II. For Malaysians it was probably the saddest year in our history.

We can begin, however, to take heart. I've just come back from a rejuvenated UK and Britons, I'm happy to report, are prospering and newly confident. Ever smiling, their annus horribilis well behind them. I return to a Malaysia and see some signs, however incipient, that we are inching our way to economic recovery. We must seize the moment and what better time. New Year is about Resolutions.

I decided this year to abandon the customary forlorn and futile pledge that I make and break on an annual basis - which is to lose weight. The first of January for once did not see me embarking on Diet No. 96 in the series. I think I've found a use for all those surplus pounds. We should be putting our weight behind the recovery effort. What we need is a national New Year resolution - to give focus to the way we move forward, specific and targeted. Which means deciding our priorities. Which means being realistic. New Year resolutions founded on faith and wishful thinking, not strategy, invariably fizzle out.

So then, let's be realistic - decide what shape we are in. Topping the critical list is the economic crisis compounded by the political crisis, both exacerbated by an image crisis. The first was visited upon us. We were victims of a species of international financial terrorism. But we were vulnerable. Predators unerringly choose their victims among those with weaknesses. We were overextended. The political crisis on the other hand was largely a home-grown product of unmistakably Malaysian paternity. It sparked all that intense politicking of which Malaysians are uniquely capable, not forgetting the familiar dash of the bizarre. The danger is that it is an unwelcome distraction from the overriding need to concentrate on the economy.

The third crisis involves a loss of credibility and the need to restore confidence in Malaysia at home and abroad. The power of the Press, combined with the power of prejudice, has created a whole misleading and damaging mythology about this country, which if repeated often enough, and loudly enough, i.e. sensationalised, becomes received wisdom. So far we have largely let it go by default, tending to get fixated on blame, not solutions.

"Let's forget last year" was said the other Sunday on the Global programme. "Put it behind us" is a familiar bromide. Why dwell on painful memories? Because we need a reality check, that's why. A doctor with a patient in crisis begins by taking his or her medical history. A business in trouble does a thorough stocktaking and audit. A good hard analysis of what went wrong last year may prove instructive.

1998 year was to have been a great, great year crowned by Sukom and APEC. It proved astonishing, but not exactly as we had envisaged. Faced with the dual handicap of the financial contagion and the International Monetary Fund's crisis mismanagement, the first positive step was to set up the NEAC (National Economic Action Council). Sukom, it is also fair to say, did deliver a national triumph, exceeding all our expectations. But

the rest turned to bitter gall - in challenge internally and rejection abroad - by certain quarters ill-disposed towards our Prime Minister in particular. This was where the mythology became most virulent, in fact vicious, and departed ever more radically week by week from the reality.

But the peak of the drama came in the third quarter. Most of us were left gasping at the sheer momentum of events with the advent of exchange controls and the simultaneous exit of the Deputy Prime Minister, no less. Like some revolving door of political fortune. Wasn't it Harold Wilson who said a week is a long time in politics? September 1, 1998 in Malaysia proved it.

Meanwhile, our Chinese friends will remind us that it is a curse to live in interesting times.

A curse soon felt. Exchange controls had flouted IMF orthodoxy, unleashing hostility. The Prime Minister's inalienable right to hire and fire his Cabinet elicited another vehement protest. His New Zealand counterpart got rid of her deputy a few weeks previously with not an eyebrow raised. Mrs Thatcher saw off her Ministers at will, and before you think this some exclusive expression of woman power, Mr Yeltsin too at one point appeared to change his Cabinet as frequently as he changed his shirt. All fully accepted.

Here it sparked Reformasi, an Indonesian transplant you would have thought inimical to the Malaysian character and culture. But many took to the streets - and the myth of the law-abiding, peaceful Malaysians bit the dust. In its wake, we were to feel the power and the curse of the Internet that can transform a local activist movement into an international cause celebre with or without just cause.

Anwar's case attracted an element of sympathy overseas, promptly fuelled by the Press into outrage. But before it could reach the cult status of Aung San Suu Kyi, the agenda seemed to shift from pro-Anwar to anti-Mahathir, subjecting the Malaysian leader to the most withering scrutiny. His detractors within Malaysia are at least exercising, and being allowed to exercise, their democratic right. But in the case of outsiders, whose personal stake in the matter is obscure, it constituted an unwarrantable intrusion into the sovereign affairs of this country.

A certain lady in CNBC seemed positively obsessed (or should it be "negatively"?). And if I were asked to identify the moment 1998 reached its nadir, it was Mr Al Gore's spurious attack on this Government and its leader.

Anwar's trial plunged us further into the glare of the media spotlight. At one point, the world was hearing as much about the goings-on in a Kuala Lumpur courtroom as they were about the White House, the Senate and Capitol Hill. It vied with the demonstrations as CNN fodder. At least no one could complain of lack of transparency.

There were verbatim reports of the court's proceedings on a daily basis that introduced a sordid note to Malaysia's usually staid Press. It dragged on to a point where we all suffered from trial fatigue, "enlivened" only by the frequent melodrama. It was accompanied insidiously, with all the effect of a discordant counterpoint, by another unofficial tribunal - the trial by media where Malaysia found itself in the dock.

The most dramatic shock was that infamous black eye which more than anything else has damaged our credibility with outsiders (and many insiders). After this we were, I'm afraid, running on empty as far as our international image went. The trial is unfinished business we take into 1999. Malaysians by and large are prepared to wait for the judicial verdict. The outsiders have already rushed to judgement.

It is not all gloom. Our demonstrations are not violent, have claimed no

lives, and if I'm not mistaken seem to be dwindling. There are no racial clashes. The streets are safe, the people well fed, calm, and, bless them, still smiling. Our institutions, which may seem to have taken a battering, remain intact even if a little bruised. Even the stock market is going up.

And one final comment. In all their haste to condemn us, the media in reviewing 1998 appear to have overlooked one very significant factor.

This was the year Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a moral stand against the inadequacies, depredations and injustices of an unfettered international financial system. His was one of the first voices raised and certainly one of the loudest, in a process that may prove the catalyst of the long overdue reforms in the global financial architecture. That would be real Reformasi with a vengeance. Others are already beginning to echo Dr Mahathir's consistent thesis. This is where he may well find his place in the history books. A prediction I have on no less an authority than Dr Henry Kissinger.

The Chinese character for crisis is "Wei Chi". It signifies both "danger" and "opportunity". We can now move on from the crisis of 1998 to the opportunities of 1999.