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Let's make Dr Mahathir's greatest legacy a reality

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WHEN I first arrived in Malaysia in February 1995 and was coming down the Federal Highway from Subang Airport to Kuala Lumpur, I noticed four red figures on a big building next to the highway that read: 2020.

As I had noticed a Telecom building close by, I asked my new Malaysian friend: Is this, perhaps, the telephone number you are supposed to call in emergency?

She answered: "The number means year 2020. By that time Malaysia will be a fully developed country.

"This is a target set by our Prime Minister. We call it Vision 2020."

I was interested. After all there are not many countries in the present world with a clear vision of their future.

When I arrived the second time a few months later I witnessed the resounding victory of the Barisan Nasional in the 1995 parliament elections.

I started to eagerly look for more systematic information. I was lucky enough to find a brand new book in the bookstore: Paradoxes of Mahathirism by Khoo Boo Teik.

It turned out to be one of the finest scientific analyses I had come across during more than forty years of my academic career.

Through that reading I began to understand Dr Mahathir Mohamad's philosophy and policy and learned to always carefully listen to what he has to say, on things Malaysian as well as on problems of the present world.

And I began to measure each facet of present Malaysian life by the standards of the Vision.

I have learned some of the challenges by heart.

I feel that if the Malaysian people succeed in fully meeting the challenges of the Vision, by the year 2020 and partly even earlier, it will be of enormous importance not only for the resurrection of Asia, but also for a peaceful and prosperous future of the world.

As a frequent visitor of Malaysia I witnessed some steps of the tremendous technical and economic progress of Malaysia since 1995.

Coming from an old industrial nation in the heart of Europe, I particularly know how important well developed and perfectly functioning public transportation systems are.

That is where you can see the efficiency and discipline of an industrial (or post-industrial, for that matter) society.

I followed with keen interest the progress of public transport in Malaysia.

I was lucky enough to see the happy and curious faces of Malaysian men, women and children on the KTM commuter trains from KL to Rawang over a weekend in early August 1995, to re-live the experience on the Star-LRT line to Ampang on December 8, 1996, and to be one of the first batches of passengers on the first computer-operated train of the Putra LRT from Kelana Jaya to Pasar Seni at 6.55am on August 15, 1998.

That was my most exciting experience since I first took the Hikari bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto in April 1965.

I always watched the four magical figures on the big building next to the Federal Highway.

I particularly liked their incisive bright hibiscus-red shine at night.

Then, somewhere in autumn 1997 the lights went off.

Well, the economic downturn called for cuts in all expenses.

Then, the paint scaled off the figures, making them unattractive even in daylight.

Is this really the inescapable fate of all visions, I mused, perplexed.

I had seen so many great visions going down the drains of history, indeed.

Fortunately, this was not the case of Vision 2020, despite the economic hurdles.

And before the Commonwealth Games, my favourite figures got a fresh bright coating.

However, at night, they are still almost concealed in the shadows of the dimly lit concrete building, so that I wouldn't even know of their presence, hadn't I been thinking of them so much.

Yet in the meantime, by coincidence if not by design, a fantastic setting has developed live to enable thousands of people to daily relive and think over again the link between their present life and efforts, and the nation's Vision.

Neon lights can give the bright shine to the figures at night again, in a fast moving illusion of progressing towards the Vision.

Commuters on trains to Seremban and Klang, to KLIA and Putrajaya, shoppers and visitors of the Mid Valley Megamall, the biggest in Asia, would share the experience.

As I see it, Vision 2020 is now deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the Malaysian people.

I believe its formulation and gradual implementation will be the greatest legacy of Dr Mahathir Mohamad and surely all future Malaysian leaders will strive to implement it in its fullest sense.

The big red figures made me interested, indeed. Now I can even understand the sentence on the top of the building: Negara kita tanggungjawab kita.

I do understand its words, and I do profess its truth.

I strongly hope that during my next visit, the bright red figures will widely shine again through the darkness of nights and many other visitors will give their Malaysian friends the opportunity to explain the efforts and future of the Malaysian people.