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A year of renewal, rebirth

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WHEN we chronicle history, we tend to focus on the watershed events which put us at a crossroads, with each route promising a different future.

But taking stock of where we are involves more than just mulling over the choices we've made - it's also about taking note of the achievements which we have managed to create for ourselves.

The last 12 months have been quieter than recent years, but embedded in that apparent lull is ample evidence of a young nation busy with the business of growing up.

A year ago today, the Petronas Twin Towers were officially launched in a spectacular ceremony which blended technology, culture and good old-fashioned pyrotechnics.

An enormous screen was suspended from the towers' skybridge on the 42nd floor, but as the multimedia show progressed, the images of Malaysia's past spilled gracefully onto the towers themselves, marking a symbolic embrace of old and new.

As the country's elite gathered beneath the towers, thousands more Malaysians were drawn from their homes to the nearby streets so they too could take a frontseat and watch the tallest buildings in the world make their international debut.

Shortly after, on Sept 23, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah was installed as the 11th Yang di-Pertuan Agong at the Istana Negara, five months after the Malay Rulers elected him by secret ballot.

The ceremony was rich with tradition, and marked the continuation of the unique system of constitutional monarchy which began at Independence, and which gives each of the nine Rulers a chance to be King for five years in rotation.

In the meantime, Malaysian women were making headway into public office, with Professor Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman being appointed director of the United Nations' Office of Outer Space Studies on Sept 15.

Mazlan, who is also director of the Science, Technology and Environment's Space Studies Division, is the first woman from a developing nation to be honoured with the post.

Her appointment is widely seen as the UN's recognition of Malaysia's efforts towards the peaceful use of outer space and space technology.

Joining her in the spotlight was Datuk Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz, who became Malaysia's first woman Bank Negara Governor on April 22 this year. A 20-year central bank veteran, she had held the deputy director's post during the financial crisis, putting her within the inner circle responsible for nursing the nation's economy back to health.

Although it was a relatively dismal year for local sports, Malaysia made a name for itself in other days. From Oct 15 to 17 last year, the country hosted the penultimate leg of the Formula One season, making it the first event of its kind in the region.

The Malaysian Grand Prix proved to be memorable: it not only marked racing ace Michael Schumacher's return to the season after breaking his leg, but it also ended in controversy.

Team Ferrari's Eddie Irvine and Schumacher scored a first and second-placed finish, but they were disqualified, handing third-placed Mika Hakkinen his third world championship. The decision was later reversed on appeal.

Race drivers and officials all had praise for the Sepang International

Circuit's management of the race, and the SIC went on to bag the Formula One Management Award at the International Automobile Federation Awards in Monaco the following January.

Golf also grabbed the headlines here when Malaysia hosted the World Cup Golf tournament at the Mines Resort City and Golf Club from Nov 18 to 21.

With 32 participating nations, including the inestimable Tiger Woods making his first World Cup appearance, the event drew thousands of golf fans and media from around the globe.

In keeping with Malaysia's growing reputation as an international shopping haven, last year also saw the opening of the Mid Valley Megamall in the Klang Valley on Nov 23.

The mall is all about numbers: with an 18-screen cineplex, a 38-lane bowling alley, the biggest bookstore in the country with a stock of 150,000 books, shops and an IT centre, the mall is touted as Asia's biggest shopping and entertainment complex.

A little under a week later on Nov 29, the general election was held, and for the first time, polling was conducted in just one day.

Following former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ouster from office in 1998 and the appearance of the reformasi movement, there had been dire predictions that the Barisan Nasional Government was about to take a fall.

Despite Opposition inroads in several States, however, the BN Government still seized the overwhelming majority, capturing 148 of the 193 seats in Parliament.

There were casualties on both sides of the political fence, at least one of which marked a break from the past: DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang lost both his bids for a Parliamentary and a State seat, leading him to step down as Opposition Leader, a post he had held for 21 years.

The fifth Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition was held just a day later, and saw over 700 exhibitors from 40 countries flocking to the island, promoting Malaysia's place in the international aviation and maritime scene.

Meanwhile, as the last days of the year drew to a close, months of warnings about the Y2K bug and its potentially crippling effects on all computer systems came to the fore.

But authorities had done their homework, having implemented remedial work and contingency measures months before. Malaysia, as did the world, sailed into the new millennium at the stroke of midnight thankfully free from the predicted cyber-bedlam.

On another front, the year 2000 also saw the creation of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, a 13-member panel of august members of society, including exjudges, lawyers and social activists, all led by former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

Formed to investigate complaints of human rights violations and help the Government with drawing up related laws and administrative procedures, the commission held its first meeting at Wisma Putra on April 24.

Musa and his colleagues have made it clear they don't intend to be just a toothless body, and have already tackled sensitive issues such as the public's right to assembly.

On a more patriotic note, Proton officials unveiled the first locally-designed car, the Proton Waja, on May 8. With a new underbody structure and chassis, the car is slated to go into production this month.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir had challenged the national car company to come up with a Malaysia-designed car four years ago, and the Waja's creation marks Proton's efforts to become a full-fledged automobile manufacturer.

The New Straits Times, meanwhile, also went through its own programme:

the paper underwent a revamp on Nov 1 last year, emerging with a deep blue masthead, four separate sections and more colour pages.

On April 22, the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd launched Balai Berita Senai in Johor, a complex housing a production plant with state-of-the-art equipment and technology as well as administrative offices.

The newspaper also celebrated its 155th birthday this year, feting orphans at Balai Berita Kuala Lumpur with music, food, gifts and fun on July 13.

This past year hasn't been without its controversies of course, and there have been numerous wrinkles on the political scene alone.

Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik made a surprise decision to resign as Transport Minister on May 22, a decision he retracted after a two-week leave and much pleading from MCA party members.

Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar also recently announced that he had quit as Selangor Menteri Besar, but in his case, the Aug 10 decision will stand. Anwar also received a second conviction, this time for sodomy, and the ex-Deputy Premier now faces a total of 15 years in jail.

With all that has happened, Merdeka Day is an apt time to mull over the year's high and low points and to extract the lessons they have to teach us. Whatever decision we make from here on however, should be considered with just one direction in mind: onward.

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