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PM unveils Proton Waja (HL)

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SHAH ALAM, Mon. - Malaysia's efforts to become a full-fledged automobile manufacturer shifted to a higher gear tonight with the unveiling of the Proton Waja, the country's first locally-designed car.

The car was appropriately launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the man credited with putting the country's automotive blueprint into reality.

The launching, marking an historic milestone in the national car project, comes four years after Dr Mahathir had challenged Proton into coming out with a Malaysian-designed car.

Equally important, the launch sees Proton moving a vital step forward in its attempt at not overly depending on foreign partners, notably Mitsubishi Motors Corp and France's PSA Peugeot Citroen.

In his speech at the launching, Dr Mahathir said Proton's success in penetrating certain sectors of the world market, including the developed nations, was proof of Malaysia's capability in mastering automotive technology.

Critics might argue that strong Government support was the main reason for Proton's success, but this was not so in the overseas market.

This means that Proton cars are world class and meet international standards.

Dr Mahathir said: "Tonight, we see for ourselves how far we have achieved in the automotive industry.

"We have introduced a car designed and invented by our own people."

He also presented awards to heads of departments of the design team after they were introduced to the crowd at Stadium Malawati.

Accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Dr Mahathir, Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, Proton Bhd chairman Tan Sri Saleh Sulong and its chief executive officer Tengku Datuk Mahaleel Tengku Ariff, moved on stage to take a closer look at the car.

Popular artiste Siti Nurhaliza also made a brief appearance at the launching.

Dr Mahathir said the success of the car in foreign markets also meant that Proton workers had attained an acceptable world standard, adding that the national car's vendors had also received world recognition.

He said: "I am confident the nation's engineering sector will receive a boost with this success and be more progressive."

While acknowledging that radical changes were taking place in the automotive industry, including mergers among the giant car-makers, Dr Mahathir said Proton would remain autonomous.

"We do not reject globalisation or co-operating with the major players of the industry ... but we want to retain it as ours because it identifies us as a nation on par with other automotive-producing nations."

When asked about the Proton Waja's price at a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir said it would be affordable and would be announced by August. Tengku Datuk Mahaleel assured potential buyers that the price "will be competitive".

Dr Mahathir said Proton was exploring the possibility of co-operating with other car manufacturers such as General Motors and Daimler-Chrysler.

Asked what he foresaw for Proton after producing eight models within 15 years, he said Proton could keep pace with the big auto-makers as it had the capability to come up with its own designs and engineering.

Competing against the likes of Audi A4, Honda Accord, Peugeot 406 and Opel Vectra, the Waja may be priced between RM60,000 and RM80,000.

The cheaper price is possible with local designing and sourcing of almost all components from about 20 vendors, who worked with Proton engineers in designing the components.

The Waja comes with both automatic and manual transmissions, and two engine options of 1.6 litre and 1.8 litre.

The Waja is available for bookings from August and would be on domestic and foreign roads from September.

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