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Poised to move forward

WITH the proposed K-economy masterplan, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will give the country a strong presence in the cyber geography of the Information Age. No less than a cyber visionary himself, Dr Mahathir is likely to add a new dimension to the nation's effort to shift gear into a knowledge-driven economy.

The proposition is well-timed. It is said that the Information Revolution is now at the point at which the Industrial Revolution was in the early 1820s when the railroad was created in 1829. From thereon, things moved fast with dramatic changes in the economic, political and social spheres. As described by French historian Fernand Braudel, it was the railroad that made France into one nation and one culture. It was the railroad, too, that shaped West America. There is a parallel here which, we suspect, is long known to Dr Mahathir and, consequently, enticed him in his bid to put the country on the amorphous and borderless cyber map.

The parallel? E-commerce is to the Information Revolution what the railroad was to the Industrial Revolution. Both were totally new and unprecedented. The railroad created a mental geography where humanity mastered distance while E-commerce created a cyber geography where distance is eliminated. There is only one economy, one market. Were French economist Jean-Baptiste Say around today, his observation that "the Industrial Revolution had changed economics by creating the entrepreneurs" would have been changed to "the Information Revolution has changed economics by creating the netrepreneurs".

With E-commerce as a major worldwide distribution channel for goods, services and jobs will bring tremendous changes in industry structures, economic and social landscapes. Presently in its nascent stages, E-commerce has already caused changes in the nature of work, flow of products and services, consumer segmentation, consumer values and behaviour and information content in industries and services. Like the railroad, E-commerce is the triggering point for changes yet to be envisaged. The significance of standing at a point when this catalyst is still in its infancy stage is not lost on Dr Mahathir. Start beyond this point and we will be playing catch-up for good, as is the case in our industrialisation efforts.

With the right strategies, we may find ourselves standing on equal footing with some developed nations in the quest for cyber-supremacy and our corporations may not be completely "amazoned" (meaning to lose a big chunk of business to non-Malaysian web companies).

That said, there is no time to lose. The key to capitalise on this catalytic point is the national recognition and recruitment of knowledge professionals. It is not the electronics, computers or softwares that will be the prime mover but the knowledge persons.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, Malaysia must invest in the passion and capabilities of knowledge workers and lay the foundation for learning at the primary level. The foundation must encompass all segments of society so that K-economy will not be an "enclave development".

The masterplan must have the nuts and bolts which will enable each and every citizen, poor or rich, to harness the Knowledge Revolution. K-economy will become relevant only when linked to developing the people's true potential.

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