

16/06/2000

Pride of the nation

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A 17-year Malaysian motoring dream is coming to fruition following the launch of the Proton Waja GX. Almost two decades after the national car made its debut, the unveiling of the Waja is the culmination of Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional's (Proton) desire to produce a Malaysian-made invention. Come September, the Proton Waja GX will hit the road in two engine variants - 1.6 litre from Mitsubishi and the 1.8-litre from Renault.

Having been given a preview of the new model at an elaborate launch ceremony in early May this year, buyers' appetite for this latest offering from the national car maker has been whetted. Mass production is expected to start soon and the cars begin to roll off the Proton production line at its plant in Puchong by the third quarter of this year. Motorists will be able to judge whether this motoring dream of producing a truly national car at a cost of RM1 billion (bn) has been a worthwhile investment.

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.

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.

Of the Waja, Dr Mahathir had this to say: 'We have introduced a car designed and invented by our own people.'

Except for the powertrain - the engine and related components such as gear-box - the Waja boasts of 95% local content. The car has a totally new platform (underbody structure and chassis) developed by local engineers, a result of Proton's involvement in the competitive motor industry over the years. This is unlike the existing Proton models such as the Satria, Wira and Perdana which "borrowed" platforms from Mitsubishi. Another model, the Tiara, uses the platform from Citroen. Proton is gradually weaning its dependence on its foreign partners for the powertrain and this is expected to be addressed within the next 24-months.

A total of 1.7 million engineering man-hours was spent to develop the car which is a commendable feat for Proton's engineers who have never had to produce a car from the ground up. During a media preview before the launch, Proton's chief executive officer, Tengku Datuk Mahaleel Tengku Arief said that it has given the company a new ability to design a product from an idea into reality, an important asset for any car company.

'If before someone were to come asking us to design something from scratch, we would have had to decline because we did not have the ability, but now it is a different matter. Should someone come and ask us to design a motorcycle, for example, we can confidently say that we can do it as long as they are willing to pay for it.'

In producing the Waja, Proton has set high goals for itself by using popular models from established manufacturers as a benchmark. They

designed the car to meet or match criterion set out by the Audi A4, Peugeot 406, Honda Accord and Opel Vectra, each of which are class leaders in quality, comfort, road-handling and ergonomics. Tengku Mahaleel said that the end product had exceeded the criterion set by the competitors and resulted in a well-rounded car that could balance between comfort and road-handling.

`We also listened to our customers and know that two of the biggest complaints about Proton cars are problems with the power windows and its body, which is perceived to be weak. Our designers came up with a new power window system which is designed as a module which has exceeded the quality standards set by us, which is twice the level for our current window system. Our body rigidity and stiffness exceeds most European models, even those in larger classes so the customers will see a difference in the feel of the car.'

The car will be built at the company's small/medium volume plant, the most advanced plant of its type in the region, which allows engineers to track each car in real time as it is assembled. Proton plans to build between 30,000 and 60,000 units of the car a year using a new modular approach which allows a significant reduction in the time it takes to design and assemble the car.

The Waja engine will be sourced from Mitsubishi Motors of Japan for the petrol units while the 1.9 diesel engine will be Renault's most advanced injection engine. The debut of the Waja also marked Proton's new corporate logo - a stylised gold tiger head, which is inspired by the two tigers that carry Malaysia's coat of arms.

Price? 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. It is available for bookings from August and would be on domestic and foreign roads from September.

Why is the Waja important? Proton will more than justify its nearly RM1 bn investment to produce this country's first locally designed car with a foreign exchange outflow saving of RM400 million (mn) and up to RM450 mn from export. Tengku Mahaleel said the RM400 mn forex saving was possible by minimising contents of imported components under the new car's local designing and sourcing programme. The programme also allowed Proton to make a forex exchange inflow of as much as RM450 mn through exports.