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Enhancing unity among people

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A NATIONAL Day advertisement sponsored by Petronas two years ago showed a man reminiscing about being taken by his father to witness the proclamation of Independence on Aug 31, 1957.

Forty-four years is indeed a long time and a new generation of Malaysians is replacing the generation of Malaysians who bid farewell to the British and settled down to reach compromises and together, build a nation.

Some stayed to provide guidance and advice but they were often heard as echoes of the past, of an era that is irrelevant to the current political, economical and social environment, and their number has gradually decreased.

But some advice of these seniors remain relevant to this day - chiefly that of unity.

Unity, has remained the central theme of National Day celebrations, from Bersatu Maju in 1977 to Bersatu Ke Alaf Baru in 1999, and is also a component of the theme for the years 2000 and 2001 - 'Keragaman Malaysia'.

Much has happened over the past year since thousands attended the colourful National Day celebrations in Shah Alam last Aug 31.

As we celebrate yet another anniversary of the Independence today at Dataran Merdeka, much reflection is needed on the importance of something, which is so often mentioned, that some do not even register the word anymore - unity.

Reflection is needed for the value of Independence can easily be lost in the fun-filled national day fiesta of parades and performances attended by thousands, and watched live over television by thousands more.

But more than to celebrate, the event should remind us of the value of independence and reaffirm the need for unity among Malaysians, who are not just divided by race, but increasingly, by political opinion and value systems. In view of this, it is encouraging to see bits of unity through instances like the attendance of Pas president Datuk Mohd Fadzil Noor and DAP vice-chairman and Kepong MP Dr Tan Seng Giaw at last year's celebration.

There may be many political parties but there is only one Malaysia and we are all responsible for ensuring it remains a stable and dynamic country with a bright future for us and subsequent generations.

This message is perhaps apt at a time when two of the largest parties in Barisan Nasional - Umno and MCA - are dealing with internal issues and the Opposition parties are rushing to gain as much as they can from the current political scenario.

Of course, the subsequent development of the Suqiu incident last year, and the unveiling of militant activity among some Muslim groups, who have gone to the extent of carrying arms, should have some sobering effect on us all.

Incidents such as the throwing of chairs at the recent MCA Youth General Assembly only serve to remind us of the need for rationality.

Revolutionary change, as can be seen from the experiences of neighbouring countries, is not really the answer, and will exact too expensive a price from all of us.

Change, nevertheless, is occurring.

In the case of Umno for example, disciplinary action has been taken against those found engaging in money politics, the party's ever present

bane which grew during the pre-crisis days flush with cash.

Realising the need to reach out to younger women, especially the professionals, the party set up Puteri Umno and efforts are being made to regain lost ground with the grassroots and improve the party's footing.

MCA's controversial purchase of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press only served to bring to the fore its leadership differences that will remain a thorn on the party's side that will fester until party elections next year.

Over in East Malaysia, eyes are now on the Sarawak State elections later this year.

In the elections arena, all eyes were focused on the Likas by-election in Sabah, where results of an earlier poll in 1999 were declared void owing to evidence of phantomvoters. Barisan Nasional's Datuk Yong Teck Lee regained the seat with a larger majority of 7,451 votes.

In the economic sector, the Third Outline Perspective Plan, which outlines the Government's ambitions for the next decade and the five-year Eighth Malaysia Plan, were both unveiled, providing an insight into the efforts that will be made to sustain growth and achieve developmental targets.

While on the whole, the aims of the previous plans have been achieved, a number of weaknesses have been identified for tackling over the next decade, so as to ensure that the country remains on track to achieve Vision 2020.

The sobering effect of the economic slowdown and the realisation of the need for tougher action has sparked a clean-up of the private sector.

Following on the heels of restructuring exercises in the banking sector, Government-intervention through State-entities Pengurusan Danaharta Bhd, Pengurusan Danamodal Bhd and the Corporate Debt Restructuring Committee, comes the repurchase of Malaysia Airlines and the restructuring of Renong Berhad.

More changes are expected and if all that is needed, is done, new faces and better practices can be expected among the larger, or rather, well-connected players in the private sector.

The realisation of the importance of the knowledge-economy and the need to move into higher-end manufacturing and value-added production has resulted in increased importance being given to education and training.

More opportunities than ever are available for those seeking further education, the latest addition to the list of universities being TAR College, which will be known as Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

On a sadder note, the historical 37-year-old Dewan Tunku Canselor in Universiti Malaya suffered 90 per cent damage during an early morning fire on June 29 that also destroyed 1,800 graduation robes and 2,000 mortar boards.

Damage caused by the fire, the cause of which is under investigation, was estimated at RM12.4 million.

Almost immediately, the Dewan Tunku Canselor Restoration fund was initiated by the New Straits Times and close to RM1.5 million has been collected so far.

The setting up of higher education funds, loan schemes and allowing the withdrawals of money from the EPF for education will in the long run allow many more Malaysians the opportunity for higher education.

Reports from private education institutions indicate that a large number of top Malaysian students are still going abroad for further education and many graduate with excellent results.

Occasionally, reports are carried about Malaysians who have excelled abroad, such as former high school teacher Gunaretnam Rajagopal, who is now assistant director of research at the Cambridge University's

prestigious Cavendish Laboratory.

Art, in various forms, is flourishing.

From the presentations of young artistes at our art schools who have won regional competitions to events such as the Second Philips Jazz Festival this year held at Bukit Jalil.

This festival also included the inaugural finals of the Philips School Jazz Awards 2001.

Malaysian poet and author Lim Swee Tin made history when he won the Southeast Asia Writing Award for his poetry in Malay.

In performing arts, much expectations have been placed on the e-village, a RM3 billion multimedia centre for entertainment products and services that is expected to be completed by 2007.

Already, it has signed a collaboration agreement with India's Pentamedia Graphics Ltd, the world's third leading computer animation company.

Social matters have also not been neglected, but rather its interest strengthened with the formation of the Women and Family Development Ministry led by upcoming politician Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

The setting up of a family specifically to deal with women and family affairs, in addition to a National Unity and Social Development Ministry reflects the need to achieve a balance between social and physical development.

Already, a constitutional amendment has been passed to enshrine the equal rights of women in society.

While many issues related to women remain to be tackled and resolved, things are slowly moving forward.

Progress in some areas may be slow, but on the whole Malaysia has come a long way since that morning on Aug 31, 1957 when the late Tunku Abdul Rahman raised his arm into the air to proclaim Merdeka.

Due credit should be given to the country's leadership for this progress, especially to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who celebrated his 20th year in office last month.

Many of the challenges our newly-independent country then faced remain, but many more have been overcome.

What remains is whether we are able to maintain a balanced perspective and remain united in the face of the challenges that remain to be tackled, and the new ones that are created every day.