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Analysts believe Proton Arena, Waja 1.8 will see good demand

Hamisah Hamid

PERUSAHAAN Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton), Malaysia's biggest carmaker, yesterday unveiled two new models, the light utility vehicle Proton Arena, and the 1.8-litre Proton Waja.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad officiated at the launching of the new models in Putrajaya. Also present was Proton chief executive officer Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff.

On-the-road prices of the Arena, which comes in three versions, range from RM37,250.21 for the low line, RM39,552.22 for the sporty medium line and RM41,249.42 for the sporty high line.

The Waja 1.8 is priced between RM77,000 and RM78,000, depending on the accessories package.

Both models are already available in the market. The Proton Arena is distributed by Proton Edar Sdn Bhd, while the new Waja is distributed by both Proton Edar and Edaran Otomobil Nasional Bhd.

Analysts contacted by Business Times believe that demand for both the new Proton models will be good although car sales are now seasonally weak. They said the launching of the new models is part of Proton's strategy to sustain sales momentum in the second half of the year.

"They want to capture the niche market and expand their product line," an analyst said.

Another sectoral analyst said the Proton Arena could sell well in its segment as it is almost half the price of the Ford and Mitsubishi range of pick-ups.

Prices for Ford pick-ups range between RM70,000 and RM80,000.

As for the Waja, the analyst said the 1.8 would be able to capture the upper segment of the market as the model has been the company's best-selling car.

"For the low-priced Arena, the quantum in earnings (of Proton) may not be that much. Furthermore, it is still new and depends on the acceptance from the people," the analyst said, adding that Proton may be targeting the Arena at Kancil owners who wish to change their cars.

Meanwhile, Proton Edar chief executive officer Datuk Maruan Mohd Said dismissed suggestions that the Proton Wira Aeroback will be phased out after the roll-out of the Proton Arena.

"We will continue to sell the Wira Aeroback as both the Wira and the Waja are the biggest segments for us. Wira now constitutes more than 40 per cent of our sales," he told reporters.

The Proton Arena is based on the mechanical features of the Proton Wira 1.5 saloon but features a two-seater cabin and a spacious flatbed to meet demands of a cross-activity vehicle.

According to Proton, the Arena is designed as either a business or lifestyle vehicle as well as a symbol of individuality and adventurous spirit.

One of the Proton Arena's features is the flatbed, which can carry a maximum load of 570kg while the tailgate is able to withstand a load of 300kg. The Arena is powered by a 1.5-litre 12-valve EFI engine that drives the Wira 1.5, with Proton's proprietary EMS 400 engine management system. Its engine meets the EURO 11 standard for emission control.

The 1.8-litre Proton Waja has higher specifications and a new power train, featuring electronic throttle body control or drive-by-wire, variable valve timing and auto adaptive transmission. These features

enable immediate digital response and, subsequently, improved driving experience.

Proton said this model is a response to the demands of the domestic and export markets for a new-generation Proton with higher performance levels and advanced features.

The 1.8 Waja is built on a platform designed by Proton, which was developed from the ground up by Malaysian engineers using the national car manufacturer's advanced research and development facilities and rapid prototyping centre in Shah Alam. It is powered by a brand-new 1.8-litre four-cylinder double overhead cam 16-valve engine with enhanced ride and handling features and reduced noise, vibration and harshness.

One of the most striking features is the drive-by-wire which improves reliability and drivability by eliminating the use of a conventional mechanical throttle and sharpens throttle response.

Safety features of the 1.8 Waja include an enhanced all-disc brake system, as well as airbags for the driver and the front passenger in the premium models.