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Dark shadows on the 2003 crystal ball

Munir Majid

Malaysia After Dr Mahathir

AGAINST this background, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be retiring as Malaysia's leader in October 2003, an event which would cast, if not a dark, at least a long shadow over the country.

An eight-year-old at the time when Dr Mahathir came to power would now barely be 30, and a vast majority would know of no other leader than he.

Add to that his outstanding achievement, and his will be boots that will be difficult to fill.

Where else in the world has there been a leader of a country for that long with that outstanding achievement that has not been screwed up in the end?

For this reason alone, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has his work cut out for him, not to mention the many challenges that will come in 2003 and carry into 2004.

The economic and financial performance of the country and of companies in 2003 will be reported in 2004, when Abdullah Badawi is Prime Minister and will be credited with achievement and criticised for failure.

In 2004, too, a general election will have to be held. We will, therefore, have to hold tight.

Our economy, thankfully, has been showing considerable resilience against the uncertain and threatening global political and economic environment. The diversification of export markets is supremely important, as is the stimulation of domestic demand.

The US market is still significant at 20 per cent of exports, but it is good to see exports to Asean members creeping up to beyond a quarter. If we can move the China market beyond five per cent and work on the Middle East more vigorously, then we should be able to keep exports going at a satisfactory level.

We are also fortunate with the high level of domestic savings which, at around 40 per cent of GDP, is one of the highest in the world, and should be able to finance investment and growth - if not at the giddy levels of eight or nine per cent of the 1990s - to achieve overall expansion of five per cent next year.

This would be a considerable achievement, but it is yet to be achieved. One of the key determinants of a smooth succession would be good economic management in 2003 to achieve expected growth.

Thus, even as we prepare for life without Dr Mahathir as our leader, we have, quite appropriately as Dr Mahathir has himself set by example, to work extremely hard to support Abdullah Badawi achieve the ends that we want for our country. And it all must begin in 2003.

I would also like to wish all our readers a Happy New Year.