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Dr M - Making Malaysians proud

TWENTY-ONE years ago yesterday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, promising the country changes that few would have believed possible. And maybe he too did not expect the extent to which the nation would respond to his single-mindedness to make today's reality.

Who would have thought that on the albeit firm foundations built by previous administrations, anyone could so radically change the rhythm and pattern of our social and economic life. No longer is the pace of such megapolises as London or New York strange to a visiting Malaysian, for whom modernity has become part and parcel of a very mundane familiarity. Kuala Lumpur, after all, is home to the world's tallest building. Satellite television, making crystal clear digital images available to anyone willing to pay, is an everyday matter. Every brand name the world over can be found almost everywhere throughout the country. Wealthy Malaysians no longer go abroad to shop.

On the surface, this may seem like crass consumerism, but it bespeaks an economic development that has given the populace an enviable level of disposable income, making Malaysia an attractive market. Economically, therefore, Dr Mahathir's achievements are beyond doubt, an accomplishment made more spectacular in recent years when his controversial policies spared the country what to the rest of the region was an unavoidable recession.

Dr Mahathir has modernised Malaysia in ways that have retained our uniqueness. Unlike many other countries, we have not embraced Westernisation to the detriment of our Asian heritage. Our multi-ethnicity, religiosity and culturalism have flourished as early tolerance gives way to a healthy respect for one another.

In the 21 years he has led the country, the Prime Minister has given Malaysians what few leaders elsewhere have succeeded in doing: made people proud of their national identity. Take Michelle Yeoh, for instance. The Hong Kong film industry developed and honed her skill as an actress and Hollywood made her a star of global stature, but home to her is still Malaysia.