

29/12/2002

The year of living with uncertainty

THE best that can be said of 2002 is that it wasn't so bad after all. As the calendar turned last year, with Sept 11 fanning hatred across oceans and civilisations, Afghanistan freshly bombed and stock markets plunging, the end of the world as we know it seemed nigh. The United States was looking menacingly around to scratch its itch to make war, emerging economies were submerging and every Muslim was chucked into the position of having to defend himself, violently or otherwise.

But so far, global dystopia has not materialised. In the broad sweep of world affairs, too little has in fact changed in 2002, and a lot hasn't. You can still count as many places on the planet where you'd rather not be in. Poverty, pollution and over-population remain eternal concerns. Terrorism found soft targets in Bali, Mombasa, Moscow and elsewhere, even as nations locked arms in the fight against it. Palestinians and Israelis are still at each other's throats. North Korea is as dangerously unpredictable as at the onset of the Cold War. Social, economic and humanitarian injustices remain as ever at the mercy of power and money politics.

If 2002 held few reasons for cheer, it argued persuasively for adaptation to volatile situations and circumstances. Take Iraq as a prime example. As manic as the Bush administration is on waging war on Saddam Hussein's regime, Washington eventually succumbed to raucous international objections by going through the United Nations. Now that conflict seems imminent anyway, the rest of the world is starting to look beyond one. A short, conclusive war and a quick reconstruction could just about limit the collateral damage. A protracted campaign is certain to be disastrous - for the world economy, the war on terror and for moderate Muslim countries struggling with vengeful extremists.

In the shallow visibility of such darkening clouds, the chief lesson of the past year was in how to deal with uncertainty and thus keep your own house in order against factors beyond your control. On the whole, the world economy did a fair measure of converting itself from half empty to half full, growing a bit less sluggishly than in 2001. The Malaysian economy had the luxury of proving its critics wrong. GDP growth accelerated from a despondent 1.1 per cent in the first quarter and could round out the year at something like 5 per cent, significantly higher than most predictions.

There is still plenty of gloom about, but a degree of girded optimism has crept in. At the start of the year, the economy appeared stuck in a slough, on which arose a disturbing tendency to find someone to blame. At the end of the year, the economic fundamentals look as solid as they can be and the excesses that exacerbated the 1997 Asian financial crisis have been largely and quietly resolved. The crowds at New Year's Eve are not likely to be thinner, as Malaysians take heart that they had done what they could under trying circumstances.

Perhaps no one more richly deserves that satisfaction than the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who chose June 2002 to announce his retirement - surely the year's most momentous event for the country. His loss was mourned in advance and would have settled into melancholia had not Umno and the Government parlayed enough assurances that his era will not quite end when he steps down in October. Over the last 12 months, the Barisan Nasional consensus was sorely tested over the English language

issue as it will again in the coming general election. It may still be too soon to bet, but 2003 could yet defy predictions and beat the odds.