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Feature-National Day (EMBARGO:Sunday/Aug 31-With pix)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MALAYSIA!

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KUALA LUMPUR: In January 1956, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman, a Kedah prince turned politician led a delegation to London to negotiate Malaya's independence.

After three weeks of negotiations, the London Independence Agreement was signed whereby the British Government agreed to give the then Malaya independence on August 31, 1957.

At 12 midnight on August 31, 1957, thunderous roars of "Merdeka, Merdeka" reverberated in Stadium Merdeka when the Union Jack, the symbol of British colonial power, was lowered.

Imagine the dreams and hopes springing from all the hearts as the Malayan flag was slowly raised to our glorious national anthem, the Negaraku, for the first time.

And imagine the feeling of being free from colonial yoke -- from the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Japanese and the British.

Tunku, one of the architects of the nation's newly won freedom, became the first prime minister of the Independent Federation of Malaya in 1957, later to become Malaysia.

Unlike neighbouring Indonesia, where independence was wrested from the Dutch with a bloody, hard-fought battle, Malaysia achieved independence peacefully. No wars were fought. If there was any friction, it was simply a case of the pens being mightier than the swords.

LONG HISTORY OF COLONIAL YOKE

Nevertheless, the road to independence was not entirely smooth, and rumblings of discontent over the colonial yoke had been heard, long before the historic declaration.

European imperialist expansion began with the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511. However, their power was localised. A century later, the Dutch took Malacca from the Portuguese.

The 18th century saw the British pushing into Malaya with the establishment of Penang and then Singapore in 1819. In 1826, Malacca, Penang and Singapore were combined to form the Straits Settlements.

By then, the British were making their push into the tin-rich states of the Malay Peninsula, and installing their representatives, known as Residents.

In 1896, the Federated Malay States was established and by 1919 the Union Jack fluttered from every flagpole on the Malay Peninsula, Singapore, Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah.

Later, the Japanese occupied Malaya and Singapore which forced British to flee.

SIGNS OF DISCONTENT

But when they returned after World War 11, it was a tenuous authority they assumed. Faith in the invincibility of the British Empire had been destroyed forever.

The British sought to impose administrative unity by introducing the Malayan Union, a plan whereby the Sultan's sovereignty was to be transferred to the British Crown and all citizens, regardless of race, would have equal rights.

This met with fierce Malay opposition and led to the creation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) with Dato' Onn bin Jaafar, as

president.

The British returned to the drawing board and came up with the Federation of Malaya, which gave the Sultans power over their states and reserved special privileges for the Malays.

The Alliance, comprising UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) demonstrated its combined strength by winning 80 percent of the votes cast in the first national election in 1955.

It became clear that a united Malaya was a very real possibility.

In 1963, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah joined Malaya to form the Federation of Malaya. However, Singapore left in 1965 to become an independent republic.

ILL EFFECTS OF DIVIDE AND RULE POLICY

Backed by the two staples of rubber and tin, the economy appeared healthy. Nevertheless, the British's divide and rule policy created some problems in the unequal distribution of wealth.

Communal disturbances broke out in 1969. The ashes of destruction gave birth to a new beginning: the May 13 tragedy was both a reminder that peace and prosperity cannot be taken for granted but have to be nurtured constantly.

The nation then realised that its unique make-up demanded unique solutions. So the New Economic Policy, the National Education Policy and other similar policies were introduced.

Much of the push for progress is attributed to the policies of Malaysia's fourth and latest Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whose bold and hugely successful policy of heavy industrialisation has seen the economy record excellent growth figures for over a decade.

VISION FOR A NEW MALAYSIA

This impressive economic performance has lent substance to Malaysia's ambition of achieving a developed country status by the year 2020.

The country has been fortunate to have leaders who have largely put the interests of the nation above the more narrow sectarian concerns, or even worse, their own self-interest.

Celebrating 30 years of independence in 1987, the Proton Saga, Malaysia's national car, was the centrepiece of festivities. Then, followed by Perodua Kancil, the highlight of the parade at the 37th National Day in 1994.

Two years later, another historic event was when the made-in-Malaysia motorcycle, Kriss, made its maiden appearance at the 39th National Day celebrations held in Kota Kinabalu.

Today, the nation is 46 years old and has gone quite a distance, besides having chalked up achievements that it can be proud of.

With the benefit of stable government, the nation has enjoyed meteoric economic progress and is now one of the world's fastest-growing economic powers and a model of multi-ethnic harmony.

Multibillion-dollar projects have transformed the face of the nation: the world's tallest buildings, a Malaysian-owned satellite spinning through space; the Multimedia Super Corridor -- to name a few -- have set to lead Malaysia into the new millennium.

Malaysia's enviable success as a multi-racial, multi-religious country has won its pride of place in the map and its citizens have earned the right to take pride in celebrating its 46th birthday.

A melting pot of peoples, cultures and traditions, Malaysia thrives on its diversity and is indeed the epitome of the adage that "variety is the spice of life".

Look around you. Look at the people, look at their smiles. This is
Malaysia, our country, our home.

Happy Birthday, Malaysia!!

-- Bernama

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