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Beyond recognition in just 22 years

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THIS is a watershed year, not least for the prospect of a change in leadership for the first time in 22 years. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tenacity as Prime Minister means one in every two Malaysians was not yet born when he first assumed the post of Prime Minister in July 1981.

In that time, the country has changed beyond recognition in many ways but remained stubbornly the same in others.

Ten months remain to October when he hands over the reins of government, and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, his chosen successor, opens a new chapter in Malaysia's history.

To remind us of how we have - and have not - changed, Nuance takes a snapshot of Malaysia and its environment 10 months before the Mahathir Years began.

For many Malaysians, Sundays started with the Blue Network's Kee Huat Fantastic Facts and Fancies radio show at 10.30am. Patrick Teoh, then in his 30s, anchored the half-hour show for the last seven years of its 25-year run.

"It was an excellent show, because the (listeners) helped to make it so. They wrote letters and they bothered to find out things to tell us," he says. Teoh was the Voice, Rabuan Pit the Sprinter, Misbun Sidek the Shuttler, Callie Liew the Face and Sulong the Resident Orang-utan at Zoo Negara.

Popular as it was, it was not broadcast on FM radio. There was only nine hours of high-fidelity and static-free radio a day, and it was kept for programmes such as Kalongan Rengan, Orkes Chamber and Mustika Hati.

On television, cowboys ruled - High Chaparral and Centennial ran every day. There were no Muppets, but TV Pendidikan had Cumi dan Ciki. For health freaks, there was the Jack Lalanne Show - jumping jacks was the most strenuous exercise so the carrot-shaped host would have enough breath to sing in his dramatic baritone at the end.

No Saturday was complete without that wholesome game show Telematch, which is how most Malaysians learnt to count to three in German. The most exciting legal drama was British programme Crown Courts.

Drama Minggu Ini still ran in black-and-white, and shows that ran in colour were marked "(c)" in the TV pages, where TV reviewers would regularly grouse about not getting Charlie's Angels and Starsky and Hutch.

RTM was just about to make the jump to full colour on Networks One and Two, now TV1 and TV2, for West Malaysian broadcasts. However, that was not a joy the whole country could share - Network Three which transmitted to Sabah and Sarawak, would carry only one hour of colour.

It was not politics or economics, but what was on the idiot box that triggered the hottest debates in the letters pages of newspapers.irate viewers would disagree with each other on the kind of shows RTM should air and - some things never change - object to the violence of some TV fare. The arrival of Happy Days was a matter of great celebration, and Mork & Mindy, an amazing achievement.

(Of course, sex was taboo - 51 men were caught watching Catch-69 on videotape in a coffee house in Butterworth. Luckily, there were legal alternatives - Elvis The Movie, starring Kurt Russell, had just opened at the Odeon, Kuala Lumpur.

Newspaper readers also wrote of weekly interruptions in the power supply

and telephone silences that lasted days. The corporatisation of Telekom and Tenaga was a decade away, and there was only Jabatan Telekom Malaysia and Lembaga Letrik Negara, whose complaint hotlines seemed perpetually unattended.

Standard trunk dialling was the norm in Peninsular Malaysia, but for the first time, those in West Malaysia could call their countrymen in Sabah and Sarawak without the help of an operator. English was still the official language of Sarawak.

In Penang, Hotel Merlin had just spent RM320,000 on a "disco club" called "Tomorrow", and in Kuantan, the Hyatt opened its doors.

Piracy was alive and well - beloved cartoonist Lat and his bestselling Kampong Boy were among the victims.

Dr Mahathir was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Industry, while Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was just about to be made Deputy Minister for the Federal Territory Ministry.

If it seems the consumers of 1980 had it good, consider the relatively low priority their interests occupied in the national consciousness at that time, as regular profiteering made buying basic necessities a painful experience.

A sugar shortage had developed to turn shopkeepers into cutthroats and housewives into hoarders. Sugar was then sold in cattles, at 65 sen each, equivalent to RM1.08 a kg.

Hari Raya saw a dearth of beef, spoiling the celebration of Aidil Fitri that year, and curiously, matches were briefly in short supply too.

Almost half the large advertisements in the New Straits Times were of heavy machinery. Boustead was selling Sperry New Holland's super boom skidster loaders and no-spillback lift paths, while UMW was pushing a Bomag vibratory compactor for packing earth and soil for RM110,000.

Even aircraft manufacturers Boeing and McDonnell Douglas, now defunct, took full-page advertisements, inviting Malaysians to get to know them.

This seems to reflect the rapid development that was taking place at the time. Advertisers were poised to exploit the need to invest in equipment of all kinds - ads for Hino buses were common, too, and the most exciting telecommunications products then were multiple-extension keyphones for office use.

And Malaysians decided which air-conditioners to buy based on decibels and not cooling capacity. "Can you switch it on please, we want to hear how loud it is," said an ad for Carrier air-conditioners.

The economy was still largely agricultural, with one in seven Malaysians employed by the sector, against one in 15 now. And one baby out of every 42 born would die, against one in 125 today.

Affordable housing was in short supply, especially in the urban centres. Some 60,000 people applied for 100 houses in Petaling Jaya that the Selangor state development agency PKNS offered to sell at RM60,000 each.

To buy a double-storey detached house in Petaling Jaya would set one back RM130,000, a whopping sum in those days when a police constable's starting pay was RM270 a month, and a Bank Negara shorthand clerk RM395 a month.

And squatter areas were mushrooming, due to a rush of rural dwellers to find jobs in towns and cities. Even so, 63 per cent of the population lived in rural areas, compared to 40 per cent now.

The private sector was happily competing with the Government for workers. Then Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh urged Malays to take their place in the private sector, saying, "The colonial period, when acquiring a government clerical post was a status symbol in the Bumiputera community, is over."

There was just one car on the road for every 16 Malaysians, compared

with one for every five today. With national car Proton still some five years away, the most popular models of the day were the Datsun (now known as Nissan), Mazda and Ford.

Many parts of the country still lacked proper sewerage - some 7,000 households in Butterworth continued to use the bucket system that dealt with "night soil".

Texas Instruments was touting the TI-99/4, its home computer which boasted TI-BASIC programming language and a 10-inch monochrome monitor. It had 72K memory, 16K RAM, 26K ROM, and solid state command modules.

And of course, no Big Macs were to be had until 1982.

Petrol prices had receded from the highs which the first Oil Crisis caused in 1974, but the second one would prove to be just a year away. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran in the run-up to the second Oil Crisis, and the war would last until 1988 causing an estimated 450,000 deaths in all.

News of the invasion gave the stock market, of 160 stocks, its worst beating since 1973. (The Kuala Lumpur Commodity Exchange would only start trading palm oil futures later in the year.)

The benchmark New Straits Times Industrial index, fell almost 10 per cent that day; the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange's own Composite Index would not be launched for another six years.

Even before that, however, the Government had raised petrol prices almost nine per cent to RM4.04 a gallon, or RM1.05 a litre, although Malaysia was already an oil-producing nation. This led to a hike in bus and taxi fares, which naturally had Malaysians in a huff.

And it took at least 15 hours to drive from the north of Peninsular Malaysia to the southern tip, along the winding trunk roads of that time. Drivers contended with speeding heavy vehicles, frequent accidents and stray cattle. The Malaysian Highway Authority had just been mooted, and the North-South Expressway - which halves the travel time and lops over 100km off the distance - was 14 years from completion.

About the only serious threat to domestic security was that posed by Rukun Tetangga duty dodgers. Started in 1975 as a neighbourhood watch, roughly half of the members, all male, failed to report in that year.

As the world watched Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein pound Iran with bombs, South-East Asia grappled with its own worries over a rebel-held Kampuchea, and rising tension between Thailand and communist Vietnam. Between 1975 and 1980, some 140,000 Vietnamese boat people arrived on our shores with most of them subsequently resettled elsewhere.

The Cold War was the backdrop against which America and Russia were to attempt curbing arms proliferation under the failed SALT II Accord.

The acronym CND meant the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, not Club Nokia Deficiency, and delicate negotiations were underway for the release of 52 Americans held hostage in the US Embassy in Teheran.

China began trying the Gang of Four which was led by Mao Tse Tung's widow Jiang Qing, for crimes related to the 10-year Cultural Revolution that saw millions of teachers, administrators and intellectuals sent for "rehabilitation", many of whom did not survive.

Other less lethal worries abounded, as a recession in Britain forced it to set ceilings on the number of foreign students in its universities, and to make them pay full fees.

On a happier note, the World Health Organisation declared total eradication of the smallpox, and said that the vaccine was more dangerous than the disease.

And newspapers carried a four-paragraph brief that 19-year-old Lady Diana Spencer had just been invited to spend a few days at Balmoral with the British Royal Family.

NOTE: In our interview with the Prime Minister published last week, we

mentioned that Dr Mahathir inherited Tun Hussein Onn's desk when he first assumed office in 1981. The desk actually belonged to Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. The error is regretted.