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Charting new frontiers

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THE 22-year administration of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister of Malaysia is a landmark in the country's history. His success in leading the country also comes amid a backdrop of various landmark events. They qualify in significance owing to Dr Mahathir's able handling of the problems. From an economic standpoint, Dr Mahathir stamped his mark on the country's development. In early 1982, he introduced a policy to spur the country's economic growth through the Look East policy, as it was called, broke the hold on Western values and established a new paradigm. Early examples of the adoption of the Look East policy in specific development areas. To date, more than 13,000 Malaysian students, trainees and workers have been sent abroad. Among the earliest foundations for developing a modern Malaysia which Dr Mahathir laid. The 1980s saw the introduction of specific programmes and measures. They included the New Economic Policy. It also allowed the public to know who they were dealing with and enabled the country to move forward. Dr Mahathir himself wore a name-tag, emblazoned with the word "Mahathir", and his leadership was a source of inspiration. Another measure which Dr Mahathir introduced to the civil service in 1982 was the Merit-based recruitment system. A day earlier, on the stroke of midnight, the whole country was introduced to the new paradigm. Dr Mahathir also embarked on an anti-corruption campaign, whose catchphrase was "Berhenti Menyalah". The year 1982 also saw Dr Mahathir being instrumental in the establishment of Permodalan Nasional Berhad which was set up to serve as a vital institution that managed the country's finances. Dr Mahathir's passion for promoting the development of Muslims in the country led to the founding of the Islamic University of Malaysia. The university was founded upon the ideas of Malaysia's world-renowned scholar, Prof. Dr. Yusoff Kadir. Another landmark event which shows this concern was the development of Bank Islam Malaysia. Serving as an alternative to Western banking, Dr Mahathir said the bank was a landmark in the development of Bank Islam. The establishment of Bank Islam turned out to be significant because two decades later, it was still a leading bank in the region. Dr Mahathir also advanced the Malaysia Incorporated concept in 1983, where the country was to be transformed into a global city. In addition, he also announced a privatisation policy aimed at increasing productivity and efficiency. In terms of politics, Dr Mahathir's leadership also faced numerous tests in the form of challenges. Then, on Feb 4, 1988, the High Court declared Umno an unlawful society. Justice Abdul Hamid Hamid made the declaration. The declaration was delivered following a suit brought by 11 Umno members who challenged the party's constitution. Twelve days later on Feb 16, Dr Mahathir announced the registration of Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO) as a political party. Dr Mahathir came out intact from these challenges, and the next year, in 1989, was elected as Prime Minister. A week-long affair, (it kicked off on Oct 18), the 27th CHOGM meeting will be held in Kuala Lumpur. The 10-point document incorporates the views of developed and developing countries. The following year, Dr Mahathir unveiled a long-term development objective for Malaysia. Vision 2020 is the road map for the country to progress into a fully developed nation. The plan sketches the transformation of the country and its people economically, socially, and culturally. It was a masterstroke of planning, which followed the tabling of the Second Outline Business Plan. In November 1991, Dr Mahathir opened the Langkawi International Maritime and Trade Festival. Twelve years and six editions later, the festival - which is also among his enduring legacies. Despite his continued successes, Dr Mahathir has had to chart through some turbulent waters. It prompted a public outcry and the Government then moved to limit the legal powers of the judiciary. A special sitting of the Dewan Rakyat was called on Jan 18, where Dr Mahathir defended his actions. Dr Mahathir said that unlawful actions by the Malay Rulers were not new, and that the Government was acting in the best interests of the country. In 1997, meanwhile, Dr Mahathir set the foundation for Malaysia's first National Information Technology Agency. The Prime Minister set a National Information Technology Agenda to propel the country into the 21st century. But his biggest challenge was just around the corner. When the Asian economic crisis hit, Dr Mahathir was forced to fire his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, this period of time would be remembered as a dark chapter in the country's history. He was severely criticised for deciding to impose currency controls to curb the impact of the crisis. On Sept 1, 1998, a day after Dr Mahathir announced the measures, Bank Negara Malaysia was established. Dr Mahathir was proven right. Some other countries which submitted to International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditions. Not only was the Prime Minister vindicated, his triumph in navigating the country through the crisis was a testament to his leadership.

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