

03/11/2003

Continuing nation's ICT quest

A. Shukor Rahman

IT was a grand send-off for the former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last Friday, befitting a great statesman who has done a lot for the country. Over his 22 years at the helm, Dr Mahathir has injected rapid progress in many areas with his far-sighted vision and at times, unorthodox approaches, in addressing important issues.

Indeed, the information and communications technology (ICT) industry is one of the big beneficiaries of Dr Mahathir's endeavours. Personally, I see him as the one responsible for pushing ICT into the spotlight of the country's economic front, alongside other major sectors such as the manufacturing and oil and gas industries.

I recall that prior to the announcement of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) initiative, IT (or simply computer) industry was chugging along - nicely but without much recognition. To most, the computer industry was just a small sector of the support and services industry although telecommunications, the other component that makes up ICT, was already enjoying attention, largely due to its size and strategic value to the country.

As an IT journalist (there were not many then), I hardly meet any politicians in the numerous IT events that I attended. In fact, only IT journalists can be found at IT functions. IT just did not figure in the pages of national dailies and electronic media then.

The announcement of the MSC initiative, followed by endless preaching by Dr Mahathir, changed all these. The ICT industry, almost overnight, became the talk of the town, and country.

Soon, every significant individual had found something to talk about ICT. Local dailies and the electronic media started to give ICT events coverage. Presence of leading politicians started to become a common sight at IT events. And ICT courses rapidly became a top choice among students at universities and colleges.

Parents too were interested to find out more about ICT - not for themselves but more for their children.

Of course, the MSC itself created quite a stir in the global ICT arena as well as strategic economic scenarios. Malaysia had caught the attention of leading ICT visionaries and businessmen alike.

I recall that during the hosting of global Internet conference in 1997 (INet 97) at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Computimes' own special issue on the MSC were quickly snapped up by foreign delegates. It did not matter that the particular issue was a few weeks old. The foreigners just wanted to find out more about the thing called MSC.

Effectively, the MSC also started the "race" among several countries in the region to create an ICT "haven" with hopes of roping in leading technology companies to set up shops there, thus catalysing the growth of their own high-tech ventures.

Unfortunately, being in the limelight also has its downside. It started a rush among locals (and some foreigners) to set up IT shops in the country.

While it was generally good for the industry growth in terms of the number of players, the ugly part was that the rush was not only among genuine business and technology people, but also opportunists - those who were really interested in making money but not willing to do the work.

Typically, this type of people tend to have little grasp of technology

but strong corporate and political connections, and in this market, these elements do help companies win contracts.

I guess it would still be acceptable for those who have money as they can acquire the expertise to do the job. Alas, many of such opportunists are not as such. All they do is "resell" the entire contract and make handsome profits through hefty price mark-ups on works of others. It's really sad, making the costs of implementing projects unnecessarily higher.

The country's rapid acceleration into the knowledge-based era has also forced the people to follow the progress at an unnatural phase, resulting in what I see as an imbalance between infrastructure and citizen development. The country already has various technology-enabled services but only pockets of people are able (or know how to) use them.

Nevertheless, the ship may be sailing at a slower speed now but it is certainly not stopping nor is it sinking.

I guess a tough job is already cut out for the newly sworn-in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to give the ship a boost so as to pick up speed again. It's difficult but not impossible.