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Nation turns 46 amid cheers and shouts of `Merdeka`

AT the the stroke of midnight, the nation turned 46 amid cheers and shouts of "Merdeka" from thousands of Malaysians.

At Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in keeping with tradition, shouted "Merdeka" seven times followed loudly each time by people at the site.

This was followed by the hoisting of the Jalur Gemilang by Malaysian Naval Academy recruits, accompanied by the national anthem Negaraku, sung to a new, slower tempo, and patriotic songs such as Jalur Gemilang, Keranamu Malaysia and Pahlawanku.

And then the Kuala Lumpur skyline turned bright with a fireworks display. City buildings were brightly lit.

This year's countdown bore a special significance as it was Dr Mahathir's last as the Prime Minister.

He was accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali; Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his wife Datuk Seri Endon Mahmood; and Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir.

In other State capitals, people also gathered to celebrate Merdeka.

In Kuala Lumpur, the other areas of focus were Bintang Walk and the Kuala Lumpur City Centre.

Earlier, thousands braved the rain for the pre-Merdeka celebration at Dataran Merdeka, which kicked off at 4pm. Events included a concert by local artistes including KRU and Erra Fazira, followed by a brass band performance.

There was also a video entitled Semangat Merdeka (The Spirit of Independence), which traced the history of Merdeka as well as the nation's achievements).

The crowd was also entertained by the Malaysian Drum Symphony, which played 138 traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian drums. This was followed by cultural performances.